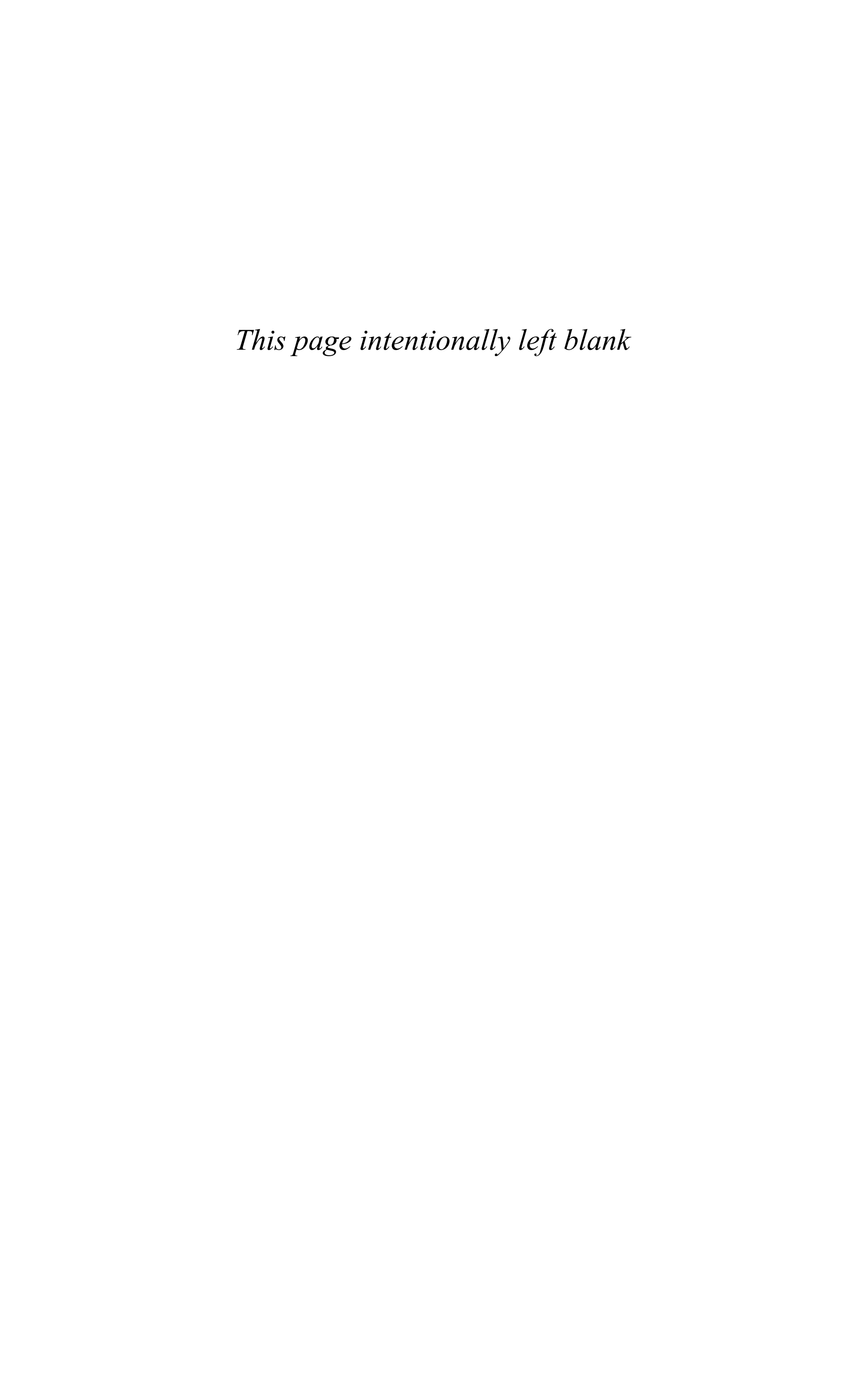
Unexpected Affinities

Reading across Cultures



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ZHANG LONGXI

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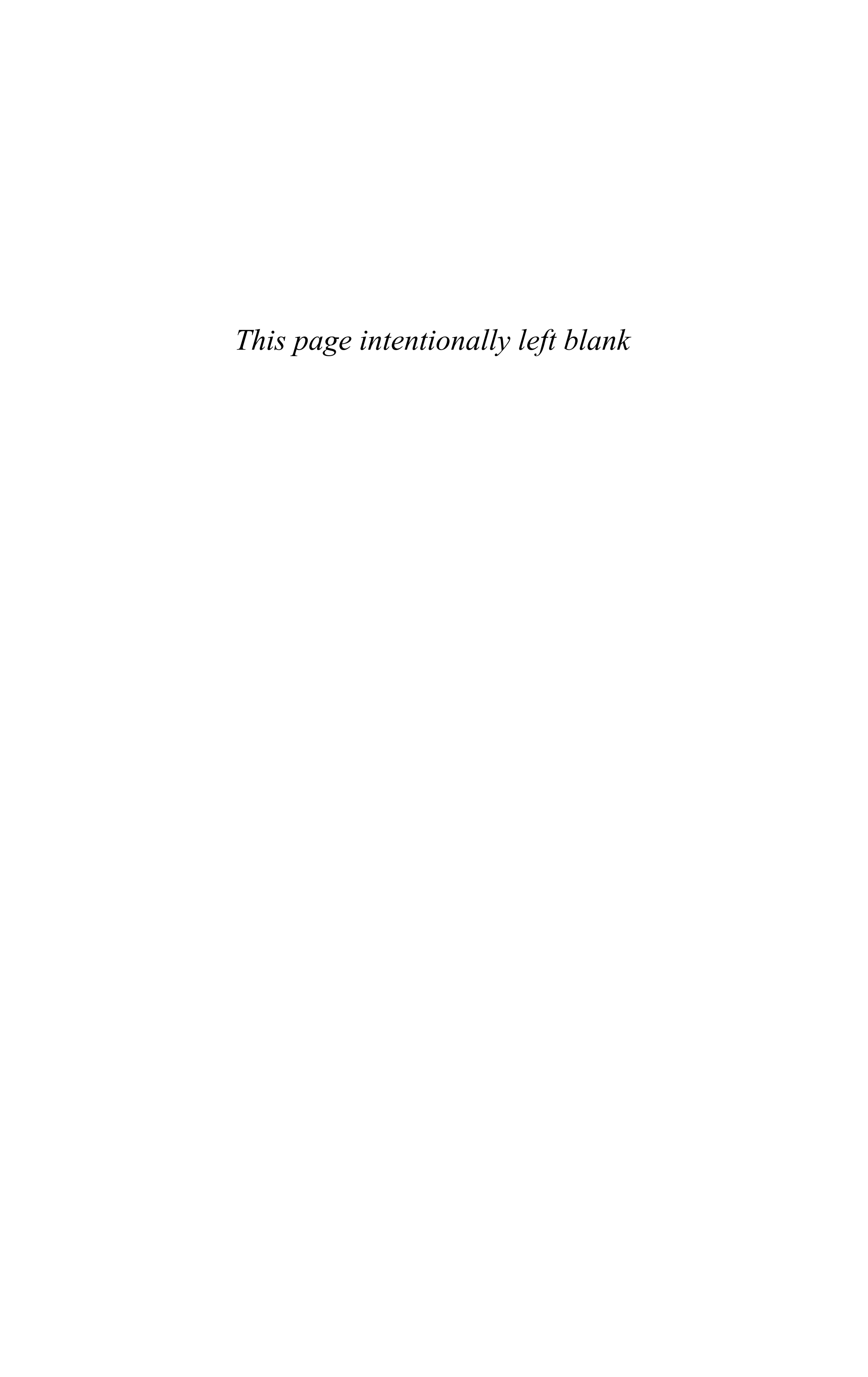
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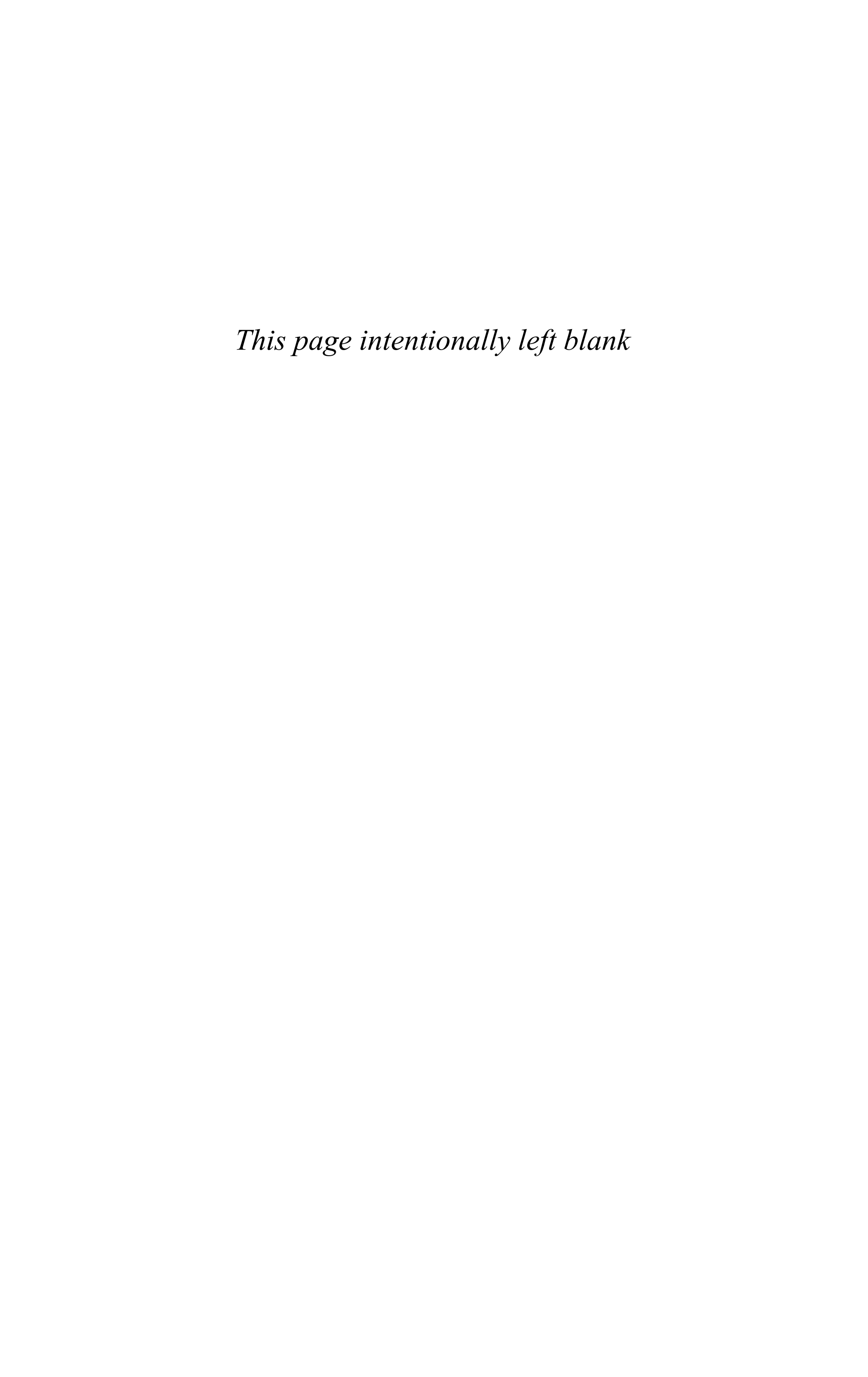
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To Mr Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998), in memoriam
Great scholar, mentor, and friend



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PREFACE

We love over-emphasizing our little differences, our hatreds, and that is wrong. If humanity is to be saved, we must focus on our affinities, the points of contact with all other human beings; by all means we must avoid accentuating our differences.

Jorge Luis Borges[1]

This small volume contains a slightly expanded version of the four Alexander Lectures I delivered at University College, University of Toronto, on 28 February and 1, 2, and 3 March 2005. Except for the addition of some examples and elaboration of argument, I have tried to keep these lectures exactly as they were delivered to retain the sense of an oral presentation. In terms of content, this book is somewhat different from its predecessors in the Alexander Lectures series, which has traditionally been focused on Western, particularly English, literature. In contrast, texts discussed in this book go beyond the boundaries of the West and are discussed from the perspective of East-West studies. In a way, this creates a considerable challenge because the very attempt at East-West

comparative studies is more often than not viewed with suspicion, if not dismissed outright as untenable. In our intellectual climate today, the pursuit of knowledge is so often rigidly compartmentalized that scholars become specialists who would not dare look beyond the fence of their narrowly defined specialties. With their eyes focused on particular trees on their very own turfs, the specialists tend to lose sight of the vigour and beauty of the forest, and they often look at the forest with misgivings and distrust. In addition to the usual specialist's suspicion of broad comparative work, there is an even greater challenge to East-West studies: it still seems habitual for many, including many scholars, to think in crude conceptual blocks like East and West, the Oriental and the Occidental, as though these were incommensurate or fundamentally different entities. Such an emphasis on cultural difference not only provides a seemingly attractive symmetry of thinking (not to mention the attractiveness of a hierarchy), but also gives comfort in a sort of mental economy that makes it so easy to assert the self vis-à-vis the other and saves one the trouble of careful investigations of individual cases and meticulous inquiries into the equivalence, convergence, or overlapping of ideas, images, themes, and expressions.

Those accustomed to think in large conceptual blocks may indeed be uncomfortable that such careful investigations will necessarily obscure borderlines and complicate the picture of neatly defined identities. That may be one of the reasons why East-West studies remains a rarity, while simplistic and stereotypical differences are often touted as the defining characters of cultures and tradi-

tions. It is largely against such a background that this book is written to present a counter-argument that emphasizes affinities and similar patterns in literary texts East and West, rather than dwelling on radical discrepancies and fundamental differences.

Of course, differences in language and culture do exist, but they exist within one and the same culture as much as between or among cultures. In China, the Confucian emphasis on the efficacy of rites and protocols in moral conduct and political governance is definitely different from the Taoist advocacy of non-action or non-interference in the natural course of things, and also different from the Buddhist belief in the effect of karma and afterlife, the aspiration for nirvana out of the cycle of life and suffering, or life as suffering. For students of classical Chinese literature, the perfect manoeuvring of difficult metrical forms to express emotions in a direct and natural manner in Tang poetry is different from the inquisitive and almost introspective tendency in some of the poetry of the Song dynasty; Du Fu's pensive mood and concerns for the sufferings of people in his time are different from the bold imagination, striking imagery, and self-assertiveness of Li Bai. Similarly in the West, the Catholic faith is different from Protestantism; the classicism of Racine and Corneille is different from the naturalism of Shakespeare; or, to quote George Steiner: 'The Middle Ages experienced by Walter Scott were not those mimed by the Pre-Raphaelites ... The Platonism of the Renaissance is not that of Shelley, Hölderlin's Oedipus is not the Everyman of Freud or the limping shaman of Lévi-Strauss.'[2] Indeed, differences exist among poets of the same tradition, even

of the same age, as much as they do among different cultures and traditions. Cultural homogeneity is as deceptive a construct as cultural dichotomies.

Above and beyond differences within one culture or among cultures, however, there are striking convergences and similarities. My purpose in this book is not just to demonstrate the affinity among cultures in conceptual and thematic formulations, but to make an even stronger claim, namely, that certain critical insights are available only from the cross-cultural perspective of East-West studies. Without going beyond the limited horizon of a single literary tradition, we cannot attain the broad vision of human creativity with all its diversities and endless possibilities; and when we reach such a broad vision across cultural gaps, we may then look back at many literary texts and discover in them certain things that seem to have strangely escaped our critical attention before. I hope that the wide range of textual examples cited in this book will substantiate this claim, and that the claim to broad critical insights will in turn justify the kind of East-West comparative studies presented in these chapters.

In preparing this book based on my Alexander Lectures, I want to thank Professor Paul Perron, principal of University College of the University of Toronto, and Professor Amilcare Iannucci, director of the Humanities Centre in Toronto, for kindly inviting me to deliver these lectures in 2005. I feel deeply honoured and also deeply humbled, because I am fully aware that this was the first time since the inauguration of the Alexander lectureship in 1928 that a scholar from the East was invited to give these prestigious lectures. I do not, however, see myself

as a representative of the East in speaking in this lecture series. In fact, a major aim of my argument in this book is to expose the fallacy of collective representation, the fairly common mistake of subsuming all individual differences under such crude conceptual building blocks as East and West, the Oriental and the Occidental.

Since this book contains the first set of Alexander Lectures to discuss a wide range of texts from the perspective of East-West studies, the opening chapter tries to lay the ground for such broadly comparative work through a critique of cultural incommensurability, that is, the idea that East and West are mutually exclusive and have nothing in common. By showing the inherent difficulty of the incommensurability argument and the ironic commonality of this argument in both East and West, the first chapter makes the case that we need the broad cross-cultural perspective to understand and appreciate different literary and cultural traditions. The remaining three chapters build on that ground to show the validity and significance of cross-cultural understanding through a discussion of specific themes and textual details. The second chapter looks at the metaphors of the finger and the moon and of life as a journey, and then discusses the image of the pearl in literature; the third chapter examines the dialectic of poison and medicine in a number of Chinese texts and in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; finally, the last chapter presents a study of the image of the circle or sphere, the idea of cyclical movement that goes back to the point of departure, or of return as reversal, as manifested in various religious, philosophical, and literary texts. All these chapters are conceptually linked

by images and ideas, and they all demonstrate the thematic patterns of textual encounters, the similarities in conception and expression, and the unexpected affinities between literatures and cultures East and West.

I am grateful to my hosts and many friends who made my stay in Toronto so enjoyable. Particularly I want to thank Dr John Tulk and Mr Alex Kisin for their wonderful support and friendship. I have discussed the ideas presented here with several friends, among whom I want to thank Professor Haun Saussy for helpful comments, and I would particularly like to acknowledge my debt to an old friend, Professor Donald Stone, who read the entire manuscript and offered me encouragement and helpful advice. Many ideas developed in this book are suggested by Mr Qian Zhongshu's exemplary scholarship, and the opportunity to meet and learn from him in Beijing more than twenty years ago remains for me an enduring inspiration. In dedicating this small volume to Mr Qian I want to express my gratitude to him and my appreciation of his mentoring and friendship as well as the inspiring example he has set for all of us in search of East-West cross-cultural understanding and communication.

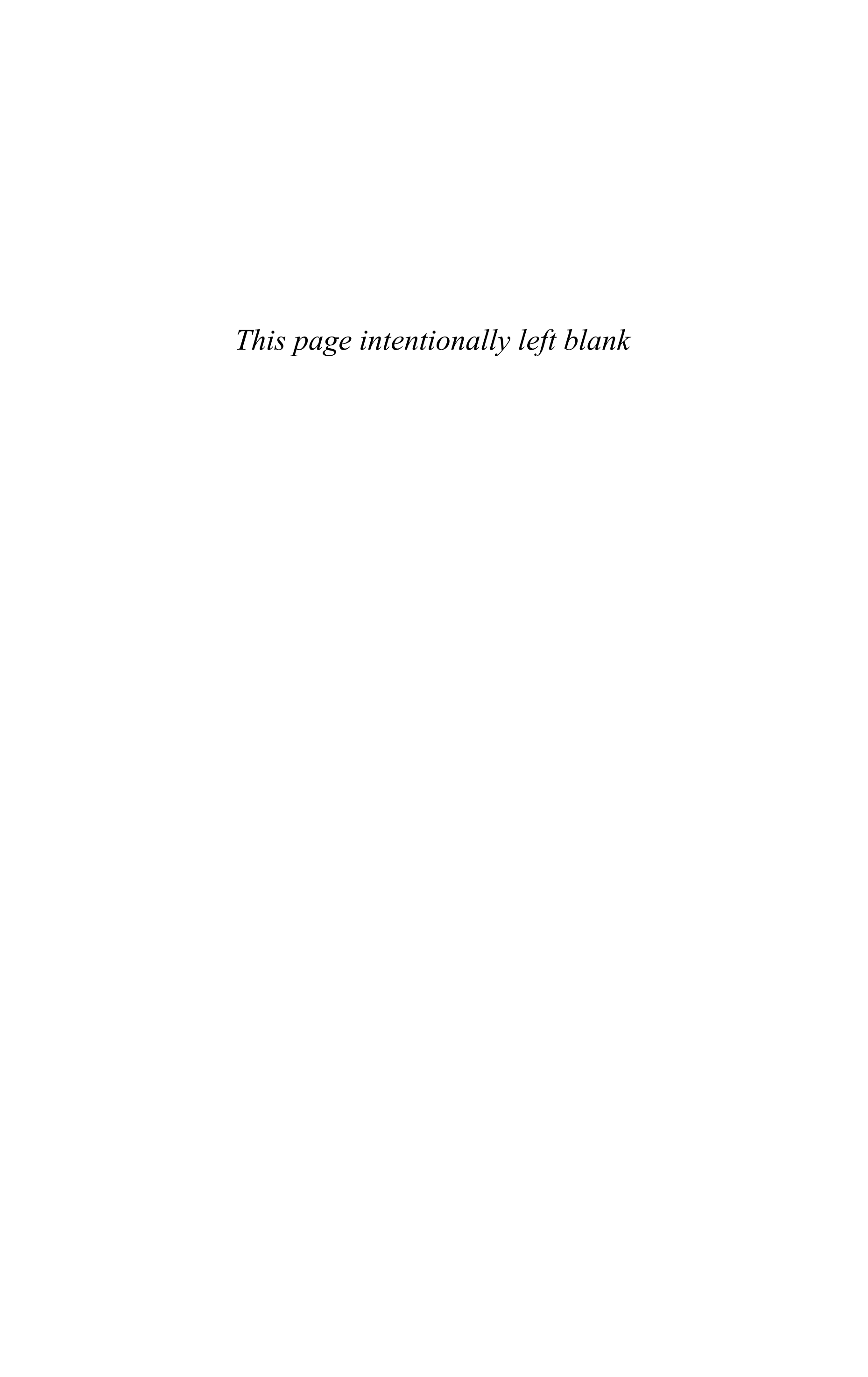
Zhang Longxi
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NOTES

1 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Facing the Year 1983,' in *Twenty-four Conversations with Borges, Including a Selection of Poems*, trans. Nicomedes

Suárez Araúz et al. (Housatonic, Mass.: Lascaux Publishers, 1984), 12.

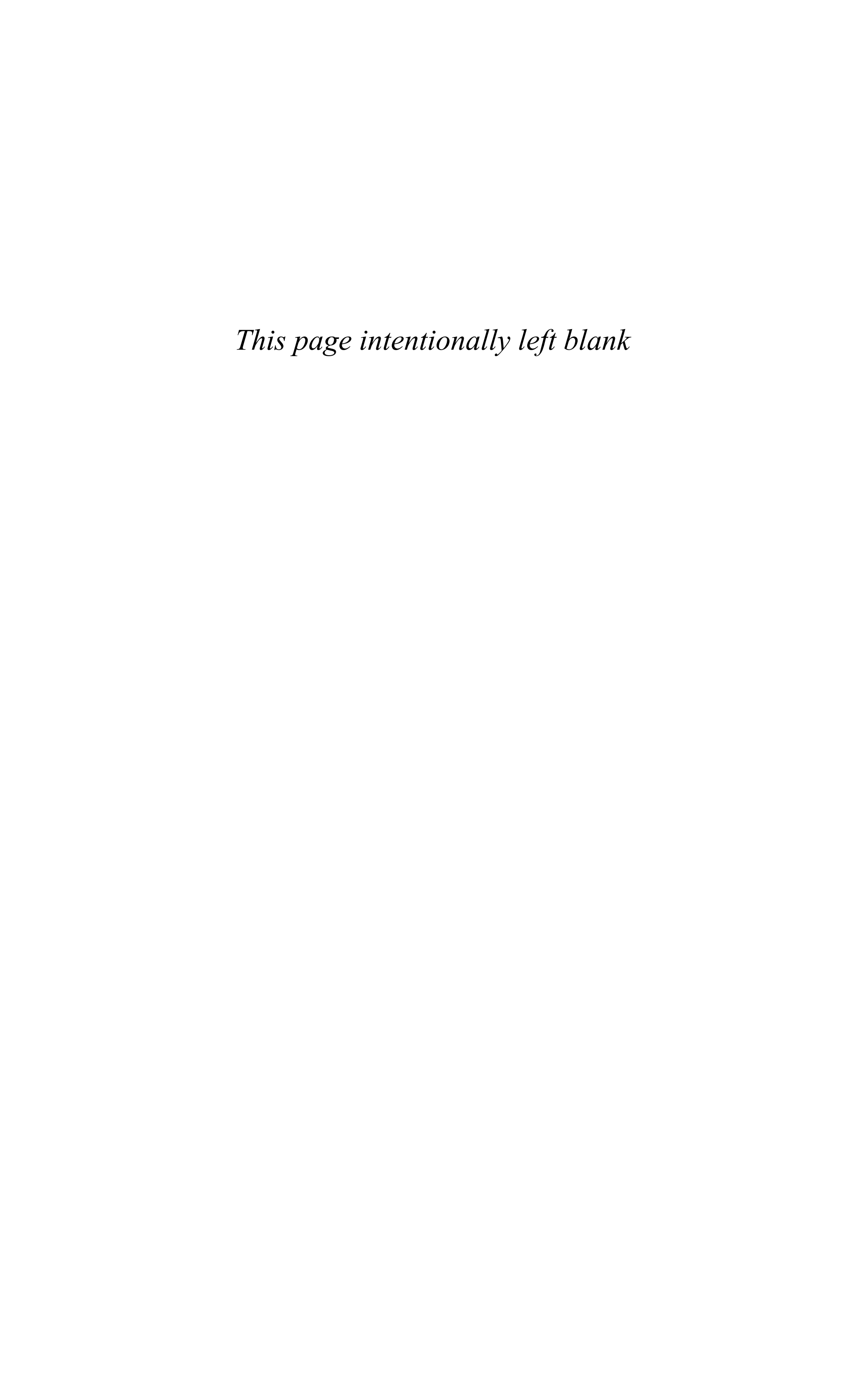
2 George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 29.



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CHAPTER ONE

The Fallacy of Cultural Incommensurability



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More than seventy years ago, Major General Lionel Charles Dunsterville, a veteran British officer long serving in India, who was also the first president of the Kipling Society, read a paper to that society in London and subsequently published it in the June 1933 issue of the *Kipling Journal*. In that paper Dunsterville commented on Kipling's views of India and the East and, with a sense of proud camaraderie, told his audience that Kipling had been 'an unswerving advocate of what we call, for want of a better word, Imperialism.'[1] For Kipling and Dunsterville, imperialism was not something to be embarrassed about, but rather signalled the glory and pride of the British Empire. In Kipling's famous line 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,' Dunsterville found an eloquent justification for British colonialism. 'The Ballad of East and West' clearly articulated the difference between West as ruler and East as the ruled, even though the poem had met with protest and resistance from both British and particularly Indian critics, who insisted that Kipling was wrong, and that East and West had already met.

Dunsterville had nothing but scorn for those critics, and he gave Kipling's line a straightforward reading that brought out its meaning as a strong assertion of the fundamental difference between East and West, even though such a reading ignored what Kipling himself said immediately after:

> But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
> When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!

Of course, the British presence in India already testified to the meeting of East and West, but Dunsterville emphasized that the nature of that meeting was an absolute opposition. Meeting can take place in different ways, he reminded his audience. 'You can meet by running up alongside, which sets up no disturbance, or you can meet head on, in the form of a collision. That is just how East and West do meet. Every single idea, every thread of heredity, of the oriental is – and it is right that it should be – diametrically opposed to the occidental mentality and heredity.' Because of that diametrical opposition, Dunsterville was adamantly against the idea of introducing constitution to India. For him, a constitution is purely British and Western; it is therefore a concept impossible for the oriental to comprehend. The Eastern way of thinking is totally different from that of the West, he says; 'the fundamental difference is there and nothing will ever alter it. And this unalterable foundation of thought and character is utterly ignored by our politicians when they try to force on India a form of government adapted solely to our purely British and insular evolution.' And then he added: 'I wonder how the word "constitution" is translated into Urdu.'[2] Obviously, Dunsterville thought it ludicrous to translate a quintessentially European concept and term into a language of the East. Indeed, can one say 'constitution' in Urdu? Or, for that matter, in Chinese?

Translatability is indeed one of the basic questions for cross-cultural understanding and communication. It is unlikely that today's readers would admire Kipling's opposition of East and West as justification for imperialism or colonialism, and yet, the concept of fundamental

difference between East and West, the inappropriateness of introducing Western ideas to the East, and conceptual as well as linguistic untranslatability across cultures – all these sound rather familiar in our current intellectual climate, in academic discourses on Asia or comparative studies involving the East. As David Buck observed some years ago in his capacity as editor of the *Journal of Asian Studies*, cultural relativism is the prevailing working principle for most Asianists, who question 'whether any conceptual tools exist to understand and interpret human behavior and meaning in ways that are intersubjectively valid.'[3] Dunsterville did not use the term relativism, but his words of seventy years ago sound pretty close to at least a version of cultural relativism: 'The fundamental differences of East and West are never to be altered, and none can say that our Western culture is superior to that of the East – no comparison is possible between two opposites.'[4] Following this line of argument, what matters is not the meeting of East and West, which may have taken place in the form of a collision, but the fundamental difference between the two that rules out any common ground and the possibility of any meaningful comparison. Cultures East and West are incommensurable – *that* is the message Dunsterville sent to his audience through his reading of Kipling's lines.

But is Kipling still the purveyor of truth for our time? Is it true that no comparison is possible between the East and the West? Are cultures essentially incommensurate? These are the questions I would like to address in this opening chapter. Without first facing the challenge of cultural incommensurability, it would be impossible to pro-

ceed to a discussion of literary themes and topics from a cross-cultural perspective. Cultural incommensurability is an absolute global claim that rules out the possibility of comparison between East and West. To test that claim, I would like to examine concrete texts in both East and West to see whether there is anything comparable, any ideas, themes, or any other elements of the texts that show some degree of convergence. In answering the challenge of cultural incommensurability, therefore, I propose to demonstrate the connectedness of different literary works East and West, a connectedness based on conceptual similarities or thematic affinities. I would like to adapt for my purposes here a remark Wittgenstein made: 'The proposition shows what it says.'[5] That is to say, the viability of East-West cross-cultural understanding must be shown rather than said, shown through concrete examples or citations, supported by textual evidence, rather than simply asserted in the abstract.

This is perhaps what Jorge Luis Borges once imagined as the business of literary criticism, in which critics invent authors and their connections: 'They select two dissimilar works – the *Tao Te Ching* and the *1001 Nights*, say – attribute them to the same writer and then determine most scrupulously the psychology of this interesting *homme de lettres*.'[6] If both *Tao Te Ching* and the *1001 Nights* are works from the Orient, Borges can offer another piece in which he has no problem making connections among the eighth-century Chinese writer Han Yu (768–825), Zeno, Kierkegaard, and Robert Browning, all as Kafka's precursors.[7] Such random connections à la Borges may seem whimsical, but the underlying idea is totally seri-

ous, because to attribute dissimilar works to the genius of the same writer, an incredibly creative *homme de lettres*, or, rather, to understand works from different literary and cultural traditions as manifestations of human creativity everywhere in the world, does provide a different perspective from that of cultural relativism and allows us to engage in literary studies across the gaps of languages and cultures.

In fact, such a broad perspective in literary studies is also inspired by a great Canadian who taught in the University of Toronto. Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism aimed precisely to look at works of literature as systematically connected as a whole rather than being isolated pieces sealed off from one another. Although Frye seldom mentioned Eastern literature in his writings, his critical theory certainly has a global perspective that should encompass Eastern literature and culture as well.[8] Following the spirit of Borges's imaginary criticism and Frye's generous, encyclopedic vision, I shall try to show the connectedness of literatures East and West through an organized demonstration of textual details. The meeting or encounter of cultures East and West will be shown to happen in very different works and texts; indeed, cultural encounters will manifest themselves *in* and *as* textual encounters.

But what about Dunsterville's claim that 'no comparison is possible between two opposites'? I would like to show that the incommensurability argument is itself common to both East and West; therefore the commonality of that argument becomes its own refutation. In the West, cultural dichotomy as an idea has often been traced back

to the ancient conflict between the Greeks and the Persians as told in Herodotus's *History*, but the purpose of writing that history, according to Herodotus himself, was to make sure 'that time may not draw the color from what man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greek and barbarians, fail of their report.'[9] As a Greek historian, Herodotus was able to write about both the Greeks and the Persians because he was 'sure of a certain common core where men think and feel alike,' and he was committed to the idea that 'in logic or illogic the mental and passionate structure of the human mind is the same, though separated and superficially diversified in time or place.'[10] To be sure, Herodotus favoured the Greeks against the Persians, but he did not consider the two sides as incommensurate and incapable of understanding each other.

In the ancient world, dichotomy was more a matter of ethnocentric pride than of cultural incommensurability. The Greeks thought themselves civilized and all foreigners barbaric, but such ethnocentric prejudices also marked the ancient Chinese idea of the opposition between *hua* and *yi*, that is, the civilized Chinese and foreign barbarians. Of course, cultural dichotomy may also originate from the utopian desire for an alternative way of life, the attraction one feels for the different and the unfamiliar, what the French poet Victor Segalen called exoticism, the *esthétique du divers*.[11] Indeed, cultural incommensurability often turns out to be the projection of just such a desire, the result of the will to differentiate hardened into a contrastive principle, a romantic exoticism philosophized into a post-romantic and postmodern theory.

In contemporary theory the idea of incommensurability is closely related to Thomas Kuhn's influential book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, in which he argues that scientists operating under different theoretical paradigms do not speak the same language, that the change is so great that 'after a revolution scientists work in a different world.'[12] But surely the Ptolemaic and the Copernican astronomers could disagree and debate with one another precisely because they largely understood each other's language. If there were total failure of understanding, and if nothing in one language made any sense at all in another, then, as Donald Davidson argues, 'we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from our own ... For we have found no intelligible basis on which it can be said that schemes are different.'[13] That is indeed the paradox or the ironic situation in which cultural relativists find themselves: 'Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability.'[14] So when Dunsterville declared that 'no comparison is possible between two opposites,' that statement was not only a gross exaggeration, but also logically incoherent, for when you recognize two things as opposite, you already presuppose a shared context within which they become recognizable as opposites in comparison.

In his later work, Kuhn retreats from his radical claims in *Structure* to a much more moderate claim, what he calls 'local incommensurability.' Instead of a total failure of understanding, Kuhn's 'local incommensurability' allows

that when two different theories meet, they still share most terms and much of the same language, but differ in the understanding of certain terms: 'Only for a small subgroup of (usually interdefined) terms and for sentences containing them do problems of translatability arise.' Incommensurability is thus localized as a linguistic problem, 'a claim about language, about meaning change.'[15] The semantic change of terms, however, can be so drastic that Kuhn considers old and new terms to be untranslatable. 'Incommensurability thus becomes a sort of untranslatability,' he says, 'localized to one or another area in which two lexical taxonomies differ.'[16] But this is a very different claim from the sort of global claims of cultural incommensurability, the absolute opposition of cultures and mentalities. Although with this moderate notion of 'local incommensurability' Kuhn still insists on the untranslatability of terms, the difficulty of translation, as Hilary Putnam observes, 'does *not* mean that there is no "common language" in which one can say what the theoretical terms of both theories refer to.'[17] As students of literature, we know very well how meanings change over time and in subtle ways, and as students of comparative literature, we constantly deal with different languages and their differences, but that has never posed an insurmountable problem for understanding, interpretation, or translation.

Unfortunately, once it started circulating in general discourse as a theoretical term, incommensurability quickly expanded far beyond Kuhn's original purpose of explaining the different norms in the history of science. When it shifts from science to contemporary culture and politics,

incommensurability often serves to legitimize the separation of different groups and communities, and even offers 'justification for a resurgent tribalism.'[18] As Lindsay Waters argues, the widely circulated idea becomes 'a perversion of incommensurability,' 'the key idea that legitimates an identity politics that insists on the impossibility of thinking across groups.' In its most militant form, '[i]ncommensurability legitimates a blinkered, absolutist, nonpluralist relativism.'[19] It is precisely such a relativism that we must face and overcome before we can move forward to read literature across cultures.

Cultural relativism or incommensurability often manifests itself in the argument of an East-West polarity, in which the East – whether it is represented by India, Arabia, or China – often turns out to be a reverse mirror image of whatever the West is thought to be. For many, China is the farthest away from the West culturally as well as geographically, the most exotic and most different, a culture developed totally outside the sphere of Graeco-Roman influence. China and its written characters, the largely non-phonetic scripts that indicate, according to Ezra Pound, more of a poetic vision than a logical linguistic system, stand for the ultimate *différance* Derrida conceived, or the incomprehensible *heterotopia* Foucault imagined.[20] Jonathan Spence once remarked that to set up 'mutually reinforcing images and perceptions' of an exotic China 'seems to have been a particularly French genius,' though that kind of exoticism is certainly not limited to the French.[21] Let me cite, then, the works of a French scholar, François Jullien, as a typical example of this exotic view of China, because he has repeatedly set up

a Greek-Chinese polarity, in which China represents what he calls *l'altérité interculturelle*, a cultural Other that stands for everything that the West is not.

Jullien claims that the point of studying China is to 'return to the self,' to provide the European self with a different perspective to 'take a new look at its own questions, its own traditions and its own motivations.'[22] He argues that because of its radical difference in language, history, and culture, 'China presents a case study through which to contemplate Western thought from the outside.'[23] In his book *Penser d'un dehors (la Chine)*, published in 2000, China is presented as offering the opportunity for the Western scholar to think from the outside, an alternative to the familiar route from ancient Greece to modern Europe. 'Indeed, if one wants to "go beyond the Greek framework," and if one searches for appropriate support and perspective,' says Jullien, 'then I don't see any voyage possible other than being "China-bound," as people used to say. This is, in effect, the only civilization that is recorded in substantial texts and whose linguistic and historical genealogy is radically non-European.' Jullien finds his theoretical support in Foucault's idea of China as *heterotopia*. Foucault spoke of the structural differences of a 'non-Europe,' but for Jullien, Foucault's 'non-Europe' is still too general and 'vague, [for it] includes all the Far East.' Jullien further narrows it down and declares that 'strictly speaking, *non-Europe* is China, and it cannot be anything else.'[24]

In his consistent effort to hold China as a magic mirror that reveals the European self by showing it what it is not, Jullien deploys a series of contrastive categories in a

Greek-Chinese polarity. For example, he brings Greek philosophy and its search for truth into a point-by-point contrast with Chinese wisdom and its alleged unconcern with truth. The Greek idea of truth is linked with that of being, says Jullien, but because China 'did not conceive of the existential sense of being (the verb *to be*, in that sense, does not even exist in classical Chinese), it had no concept of truth.'[25] Again, the idea of way in the West leads to truth or a transcendental origin, but in China, he says, 'the way recommended by wisdom leads to nothing. No truth – revealed or discovered – constitutes its destination.'[26] A number of other categories are brought into such negative comparisons, in which the pattern of contrast remains the same: namely, the presence of a certain concept in Greece and the alleged lack of that concept in China. Thus, Jullien contrasts Europe and China as being and becoming, cause and tendency, individuality and group relation, metaphysical and natural, freedom and spontaneity, obsession with ideas and indifference to ideas, historical philosophy and wisdom with no history, and so forth.[27] The contrastive pattern is so remarkably consistent that 'Jullien's China,' as Haun Saussy comments, becomes 'a reversed image of his Europe – *that which I am not*, in Levinas's words, but (precisely) not in his sense.'[28]

Saussy calls our attention to the circular movement of Jullien's argument – circular because its aim already predetermines its outcome. Whatever Jullien has to say about China and its alleged lack of 'being' or 'truth' or some other category, therefore, his argument does not describe the condition of Chinese thought as such, but comes as a

totally predictable result from his framework of Greek-Chinese opposition. Without getting out of this contrastive pattern, Saussy further argues, 'it may appear that the more results Jullien's method produces, the more his principle of contrastive reading totters. The production of regular, correlated oppositions transforms "the other" into "our other," which is to say, into a negative portrait of ourselves (or of a certain understanding of ourselves). In this transformation the allure of the unknown risks turning into a roundabout form of narcissism.'[29]

It is ironic that the same argument of fundamental difference is repeated in China by those who would see the West as the reverse image of the East. Since China's defeat in the Opium Wars of the 1840s, debates on the nature of Chinese and Western cultures have permeated intellectual and political discourses, often carried out in the context of self-strengthening and Chinese nationalism. In the early twentieth century, many intellectuals saw Chinese culture as the opposite of Western culture, either as a burden to get rid of or as a source of spiritual values for China's rejuvenation. Those involved in such debates held very different views; they were even opposed to one another politically and ideologically, but they often converged on the one point about East-West dichotomy.

For example, Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), a leading figure in the May Fourth new culture movement, argued that 'nations East and West are all different, each with its distinct system of thinking, as divergent from one another as the south and the north, and as incompatible with one another as fire and water.' He identified a rather peculiar

difference as the most fundamental one between East and West when he said: 'Western nations hold war as their norm, while Eastern nations hold peace as their norm.'[30] As a radical thinker advocating revolution in China, Chen wanted to shake the Chinese out of peaceful quietude and urged them to learn from the West. His rival Du Yaquan (1873–1933) opposed Chen's critique of traditional Chinese culture, but when it came to the East-West dichotomy, Du completely agreed with Chen in seeing the West as a 'dynamic civilization' and the East a 'static' one. In Du's view, however, the dynamic and aggressive West has caused great damage to nature and the world, because Western society is 'normally in the state of war,' while Chinese society is 'normally in the state of peace'; thus China can offer remedies for the excessive destructiveness of Western civilization. 'The difference between Western and our own civilization is a difference in kind, not just of degree,' said Du Yaquan, 'and our civilization is exactly that which can correct the defects of Western civilization and make up for what it lacks.'[31] Opposed to Du Yaquan was another radical intellectual, Li Dazhao (1889–1927), a professor at Peking University who later died a communist martyr. Again, Li totally agreed with Du in setting up the East-West dichotomy, but went even further. 'Civilizations East and West have fundamental differences,' he said. 'Eastern civilization advocates stasis, while Western civilization advocates dynamism.'[32] Reminiscent of Jullien's contrastive categories, Li set up a series of correlated oppositions between East and West in a long list of contrastive pairs. He even quoted Kipling's lines to support the East-West polarity, which only shows

how widespread and influential the idea of cultural incommensurability was in China at that time.[33]

The image of the West as dynamic, aggressive, and prone to war was certainly shaped by the devastations of First World War, which was then a recent memory, but it was also the result of the blatant militarism of Western imperialist powers. Such an image was closely connected with the myth of a 'Western materialism' advanced in technology but devoid of morality, and these images and myths often served to boost Chinese national pride and indulge self-righteousness on the part of some Asian intellectuals. In 1921 a Chinese scholar, Liang Shuming (1893–1988), published *Cultures East and West and Their Philosophies*, in which he not only reaffirmed the fundamental differences between East and West, but also announced the decline of Western culture and the rise of Chinese culture, with the prospect of the entire world turning to follow 'the Chinese way, or the Confucian way.'[34] In more recent times, that line of argument has resurfaced in a surge of nationalistic sentiment closely related to the idea of cultural incommensurability. 'The root of the fundamental difference between the two cultural systems lies in the difference of modes of thought,' says Ji Xianlin, one of the most respected senior scholars in China today. 'The East advocates synthesis, while the West advocates analysis, and their differences manifest themselves everywhere, in the humanities and social sciences as well as in natural sciences.'[35] He argues that the aggressive analytic mode of Western thought has caused severe damage to nature and the human world, and that the only remedy lies in 'the philosophical thinking of the

Chinese or Easterners, of which the most important is the idea of the "unity of heaven and man."' Only by following the Eastern way of thinking, he declares, 'can humanity survive and go on living in happiness.'[36] All this textual evidence clearly shows that the idea of incommensurability resides in the East as well as the West, and that cultural dichotomy as put forward by Asian scholars is just as detrimental to cross-cultural understanding as cultural relativism coming from the West.

The fact is that similarities and differences exist everywhere, within one culture as well as between or among cultures. Although an understanding of different cultures is often difficult and imperfect, it has always had a chance in human communication. The inference must be that cultures are not and cannot be totally incommensurable or untranslatable. Global claims of cultural incommensurability are very often gross exaggerations. For example, François Jullien certainly overstates the case when he claims that truth is an exclusively Greek and Western concept, while in China there is 'no concept of truth.'[37] First, let us ask, did the Greeks have a unified concept of truth? According to Geoffrey Lloyd, in a recent study, we can 'distinguish three main families of positions about truth in Greece, the disputes between which are more or less where our own modern debates started. These are the objectivist, the relativist, and the sceptical.'[38] If Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, their differences notwithstanding, can be said to represent the objectivist position, then Protagoras, who claims that 'a human being is the measure of all things,' represents the subjectivist or relativist position. Not only did the Pyrrhonian sceptics rep-

resent the third position in the Hellenistic period, but long before them, in the fifth century B.C.E., Gorgias had already put forward a strong version of scepticism. From all these we may conclude, as Lloyd puts it, 'that there is no one Greek concept of truth. It is not just that the Greeks disagreed on the answers to the questions: they disagreed on the questions themselves.'[39] To claim that the Greeks had a unified concept of truth, and that that truth is uniquely Western, simply collapses all internal differences in Greek and Western thought and presents a simplistic notion of cultural essence. Such claims, in fact, cannot be true.

On the Chinese side, there are likewise different positions concerning the questions of truth, reality, objectivity, reliability, and so forth. The debate on *zhengming*, or the rectification of names, – that is, the effort to avoid ambiguity in language and to make a word coincide with its referent – is a major issue in ancient Chinese philosophy, articulated by Confucius himself, and is concerned with the correspondence of language with reality. While the Confucian philosopher Xunzi insists on the correctness of names in calling *this* a *this*, and *that* a *that*, the Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi argues that all deictic words and names are relative to a particular point of view, and he asks, 'Are there really *this* and *that*? Or are there no such things as *this* and *that*?'[40] Zhuangzi is famous for saying that he is not sure whether he is a man dreaming of being a butterfly, or really a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuangzi the philosopher.[41] Here we have Xunzi's view being comparable with 'Aristotle's account of what it is to tell the truth,' while Zhuangzi's opposite view

goes 'further even than Protagorean relativism.'[42] The point is that truth and related issues have been discussed in both China and Greece, and no one culture has the monopoly on truth or questions about truth.

But let me conclude the discussion of truth with a literary example. Tao Yuanming (365–427), a great poet in fourth-century China, wrote about his simple life in the country and his quiet contemplation of nature. He realized that nature had some sort of true meaning for him, that the beauty of nature was a manifestation of truth. In a peaceful and glorious sunset, as the southern hills bathed in the last golden rays and all the birds were flying home to their nests, he seemed to have a sudden realization of the existence of truth, but he felt that the kind of truth he mentally grasped by intuition was not something he could articulate in language. Hence the famous last lines of his poem: 'There is a true meaning in all of these, / But when I try to explain, I forget my words.'[43] The poet's forgetting of words alludes to a famous passage in the *Zhuangzi* where the philosopher says that words exist for the meaning, just as the trap exists for the fish: 'Once you've got the fish, you forget the trap,' and 'once you've got the meaning, you forget the word.'[44] For Zhuangzi, true meaning or the true reality of *tao* is beyond language, so he prefers silence to speech and insists that 'to explain is not as good as to keep silent, for *tao* cannot be heard.'[45] That mystic gesture provides a philosophical background for the poet's claim that the moment he tries 'to explain,' he forgets his words. But before this negative moment of forgetting or silence, there was a moment of positive knowledge when he declared, 'There *is* a true meaning in

all of these,' thereby affirming the presence of truth in what he perceived in nature. Truth so articulated in art and poetry, as Hans-Georg Gadamer argues, is certainly different from scientific truth, but it is truth nonetheless. 'Is there to be no knowledge in art? Does not the experience of art contain a claim to truth which is certainly different from that of science, but just as certainly is not inferior to it?' asks Gadamer. And he answers affirmatively that 'the experience (*Erfahrung*) of art is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind ... but still knowledge, i.e., conveying truth.'[46]

If Tao Yuanming felt that truth could only be grasped by the mind, but not expressed in language, isn't that close to what Plato meant when he remarked that concrete things are 'only images,' that what is perceived as true realities 'can be seen only by the mind'?[47] The poet knows that there is true meaning in the beauty of nature, but that truth is ineffable. I am of course not suggesting that there is no difference between Plato and Zhuangzi or Tao Yuanming, but they do share the idea that language is inadequate for speaking about the true reality of things. Each of them has his way of expression embedded in its own intellectual and historical context, and therefore different from any other, but those differences are matters of degree, not of kind, and we must not lose sight of the affinities of thought and imagination beyond differences.

In literary criticism, difference will be prominent on the level of textual details, as every poem or play or novel is different from every other, and it will take some distance of 'standing back' to discern a similar thematic pattern or structure in different works. 'In looking at a picture,' as

Northrop Frye says in describing different critical approaches, 'we may stand close to it and analyze the details of brush work and palette knife. This corresponds roughly to the rhetorical analysis of the new critics in literature.' To see the whole picture, however, we need to stand back from the canvas. 'In the criticism of literature, too,' says Frye, 'we often have to "stand back" from the poem to see its archetypal organization.'[48] When we move back a sufficient distance, we may see the themes and archetypes that connect literary works beyond their minute textual differences.

I would like to offer another metaphor, similar to that of standing back, for the kind of thematic comparison I have in mind, that is, the metaphor of climbing up a ladder, which Wittgenstein also used at the end of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Once the reader has comprehended the propositions in his book, says Wittgenstein, the reader should forget about them just as he should 'throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.'[49] In literary studies, as we climb higher up the ladder, we gradually move away from textual details and look at literary texts as part of a larger picture, and as we reach a sufficient height, the thematic patterns and affinities of different works become visible. But instead of throwing away the ladder, as the philosopher recommends, in literary criticism the ladder, each rung of it, cannot be discarded, not only because it helps us get to the height of insight, but because all the insights depend so much on the rich details of the literary text and language that form the different rungs of this metaphorical ladder. As Marjorie Perloff argues, 'in the course of the

climbing that occurs, the rungs of the language ladder manifest their inherent strangeness,' thus providing the possibility of new insights.[50] The horizon we reach after climbing up is a higher one, and the view we command more capacious than what is admissible in the alley of cultural relativism.

Thus, against the idea of cultural incommensurability, I am arguing for the kind of horizon and perspective that one gets after standing back from the canvas or climbing up a ladder, a perspective from which one sees the incredibly rich treasure of literatures East and West, a great variety of forms, genres, rhetorical devices, and ways of expression, but a variety not without order and affinity, a multiplicity not without discernible patterns and intelligible shapes and contours. With this perspective one can be free from the myopia of cultural dichotomies and rise above the parochial views of ethnocentrism and narrow-minded nationalism. For the study of literature in our time, I would argue, that is the appropriate perspective, the kind of imaginative criticism Borges envisioned, a criticism that takes all literature into its scope as expressions of human creativity and teaches us to appreciate literary genius everywhere in the world that transcends linguistic, cultural, and every other kind of boundary.

I began with Kipling's line – 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet' – which Major General Dunsterville understood as giving expression to the absolute opposition between the Oriental and the Occidental and, eventually, as justifying British imperialism. But that is only one way of looking at the East-West

relationship and, as I argue, it is a biased, misleading, and seriously problematic way. Let me end this chapter by quoting the famous lines of the great poet Goethe, whose *West-östlicher Divan* expresses the vision since Leibniz of the close ties and mutual understanding of the East and the West:

> Wer sich selbst und andre kennt,
> Wird auch hier erkennen:
> Orient und Okzident
> Sind nicht mehr zu trennen.
>
> He who knows himself and others
> Will also here see:
> The Orient and the Occident
> Separate will never be.

NOTES

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2 Ibid., 373.
3 David D. Buck, 'Forum on Universalism and Relativism in Asian Studies: Editor's Introduction,' *Journal of Asian Studies* 50:1 (February 1991): 30.
4 Dunsterville, '"Stalky" on "Kipling's India,"' 373.
5 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 4.461, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 97.
6 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,' trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: Modern Library, 1983), 13.

7 See Borges, 'Kafka and His Precursors,' trans. J.E. Irby, ibid., 199–200.
8 See Robert D. Denham, 'Frye and the East: Buddhist and Hindu Translations,' in *Northrop Frye: Eastern and Western Perspectives*, ed. Jean O'Grady and Wang Ning (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 3–18. 'Frye never experienced total immersion' in Eastern culture, says Denham, but he did 'wade more deeply into Eastern waters than his public writings suggest' (4).
9 Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 33.
10 David Grene, introduction to Herodotus, *The History*, 11, 12.
11 See Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme: Une esthétique du divers* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1978). 'La sensation d'Exotisme,' says Segalen, 'qui n'est autre que la notion du différent; la perception du Divers; la connaissance que quelque chose n'est pas soi-même; et le pouvoir d'exotisme, qui n'est que le pouvoir de concevoir autre' (23).
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13 Donald Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,' in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 197, 198.
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15 Thomas S. Kuhn, 'Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability,' in *The Road since Structure: Philosophical Essays, 1970–1993, with an Autobiographical Interview*, ed. James Conant and John Haugeland (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 36.
16 Kuhn, 'The Road since *Structure*,' ibid., 93.
17 Hilary Putnam, 'The Craving for Objectivity,' in *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 127.
18 Lindsay Waters, 'The Age of Incommensurability,' *Boundary 2* 28:2 (Summer 2001): 144.
19 Ibid., 145.
20 See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 90; and

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), xix.

21 Jonathan D. Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 145.

22 François Jullien, *La valeur allusive: Des catégories originales de l'interprétation poétique dans la tradition chinoise (Contribution à une réflexion sur l'altérité interculturelle)* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1985), 8; see also 11–12. Translations from French are mine.

23 François Jullien, *Detour and Access: Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2000), 9.

24 François Jullien with Thierry Marchaisse, *Penser d'un dehors (la Chine): Entretiens d'Extrême-Occident* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 39. Translations from French are mine.

25 François Jullien, 'Did Philosophers Have to Become Fixated on Truth?' trans. Janet Lloyd, *Critical Inquiry* 28:4 (Summer 2002): 810.

26 Ibid., 820.

27 See ibid., 823–4; also Haun Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 110–11.

28 Saussy, *Great Walls of Discourse*, 111.

29 Ibid., 112.

30 Chen Duxiu, 'Differences in Basic Thinking between Eastern and Western Nations,' in *Wusi qianhou Dong Xi wenhua wenti lunzhan wenxuan* [*Selected Essays in the Debate on Eastern and Western Cultures in the May Fourth Period*], ed. Chen Song (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Press, 1985), 12.

31 Du Yaquan, 'Static Civilization and Dynamic Civilization,' ibid., 17, 20.

32 Li Dazhao, 'Fundamental Differences between Eastern and Western Civilizations,' ibid., 57.

33 See ibid., 63.

34 Liang Shuming, *Dong Xi wenhua jiqi zhexue* [*Cultures East and West and Their Philosophies*], in *Liang Shuming quanji* [*Liang Shuming's Complete Works*], vol. 1 (Jinan: Shandong renmin chubanshe, 1989), 504.

35 Ji Xianlin, 'General Introduction to the *Compendium of Eastern Cul-*

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36 Ji Xianlin, 'A New Interpretation of the "Unity of Heaven and Man,"' ibid., 84.

37 Jullien, 'Did Philosophers Have to Become Fixated on Truth?' 810.

38 G.E.R. Lloyd, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Civilizations: Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and Chinese Science and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 53.

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41 See Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi* [*Variorum Edition of the Zhuangzi*], 53–4.

42 Lloyd, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Civilizations*, 59.

43 Tao Yuanming, 'Drinking Wine, 20 Poems,' poem no. 5, in Yuan Xingpei, *Tao Yuanming ji jianzhu* [*Tao Yuanming's Works with Annotations*] (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2003), 247.

44 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi* [*Variorum Edition of the Zhuangzi*], 407.

45 Ibid., 326.

46 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 97–8.

47 Plato, *Republic* 6.510e, trans. Paul Shorey, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 746.

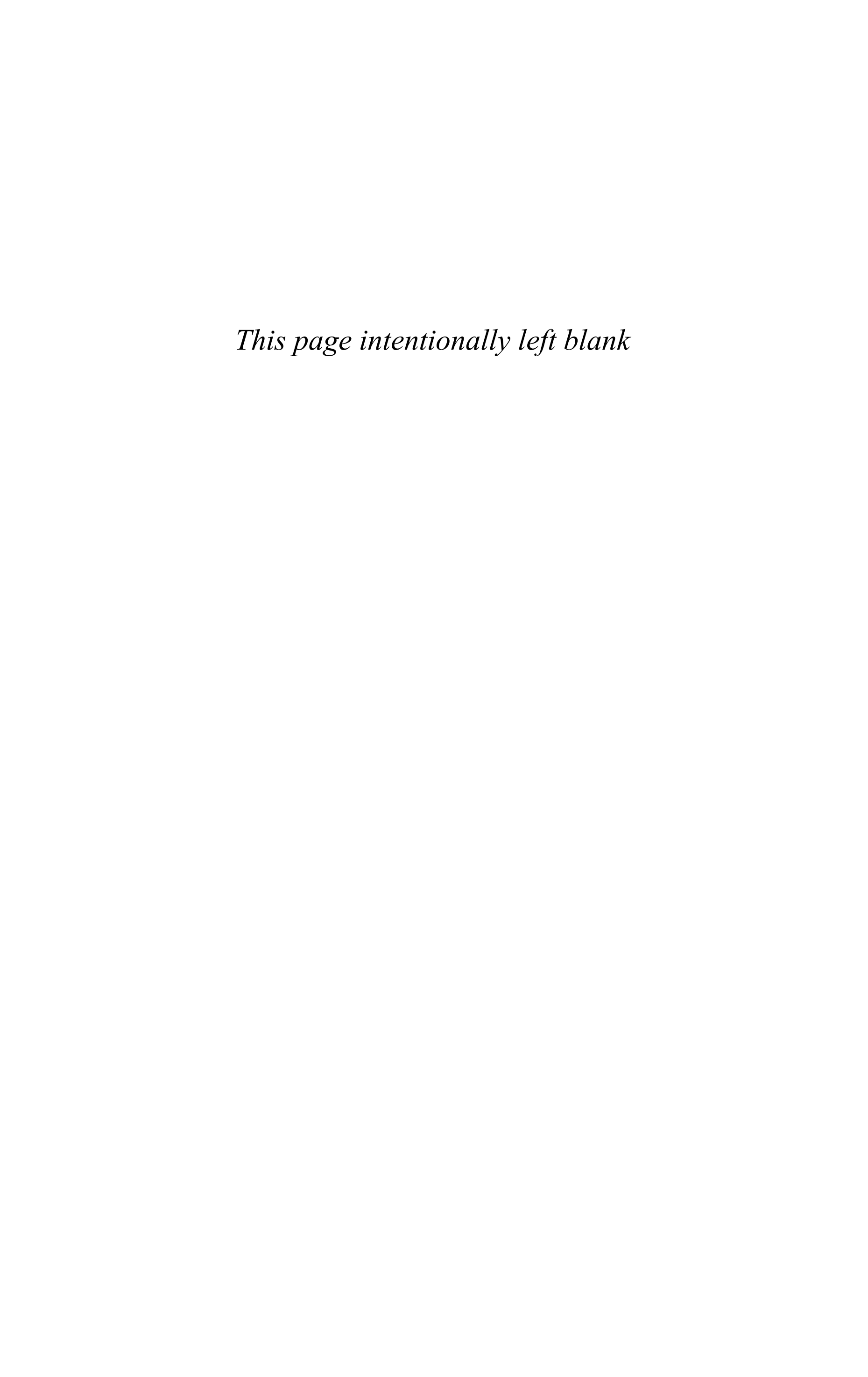
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49 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.54, p. 189.

50 Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), xv.

CHAPTER TWO

'Faire une perle d'une larme': Reading across Cultures


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In the first chapter I tried to show that cultural incommensurability contradicts itself in having advocates making the same argument on both sides of the East-West divide, while according to that very argument, mentalities, ideas, and propositions East and West are supposed to be fundamentally different and mutually exclusive. My intention was to clear the way for East-West studies, and having done so, I would like now to go into discussions of literary themes across East and West, to engage in what I call textual and cultural encounters through concrete examples.

My first example is drawn from personal experience in the early years of my teaching career, when I was a tutor at Harvard, responsible for a sophomore tutorial for students in the undergraduate program known as 'Literature Concentration.' In that literature course of my own design, I introduced a passage from the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi and asked my students to read it along with a passage from one of Plato's *Letters*. In that letter Plato speaks of his distrust of language, particularly written language. By using the example of a circle in five different categories – circle as a name, a description, an image, a concept, and, finally, a pure idea that Plato considers to be the only 'actual object of knowledge which is the true reality' – the philosopher argues that no language can adequately describe or express that true reality. 'Hence no intelligent man will ever be so bold as to put into language those things which his reason has contemplated, especially not into a form that is unalterable – which must be the case with what is expressed in written symbols.'[1] By differentiating the five categories of an

object, Plato's argument moves in the disciplined route of logical reasoning familiar to my students, while his critique of language here and of poetry in *Republic* 10, I thought, should be clearly understood by students of literature so that they could learn how to respond.

The Zhuangzi passage, however, was not familiar to my students, though it happens to speak also about a circle (or more precisely, a wheel) and the inadequacy of language. Zhuangzi says something rather similar to Plato when he complains: 'What can be seen in looking at things are their shapes and colours; and what can be heard in listening are names and sounds. It is sad that the world should suppose that shapes, colours, names, and sounds are sufficient to reveal the true reality of things.' As these external markers are not sufficient to reveal truth, Zhuangzi claims, following the Taoist philosopher Laozi, that 'the one who knows does not speak; the one who speaks does not know.' Instead of laying out an elaborate taxonomy of different categories and deductive reasoning, however, he tells the story of a wheelwright who happens to work in front of a hall where Duke Huan is reading. The wheelwright tells the duke that the book he is reading contains 'nothing but the dregs of the ancients!'[2] The duke is not amused and demands an explanation. The wheelwright then remarks that the art of making a wheel, presumably a matter much simpler than the wisdom the duke wants to absorb from old books, is something quite beyond language. 'I can't even teach it to my son, and my son can't learn it from me,' says the wheelwright. 'The ancients and what they could not pass on to posterity are all gone, so what you are read-

ing, my lord, is nothing but the dregs of the ancients!'[3] The Zhuangzi text is full of such charming anecdotal stories, which my students, with the help of some explanations, could understand without much difficulty, but the form of Zhuangzi's argument is so different from that of Plato's that a student asked me in genuine perplexity: 'You mean this is philosophy?'

That is of course one of the intended effects of reading across cultures or across boundaries of cultural and literary forms. It is important and useful for all of us, I believed then as I do now, to expand our horizon of understanding and learn to appreciate different forms of expression that nevertheless can be brought together in a meaningful dialogue about something interesting and significant, some common themes or shared concerns. The question that student raised does not so much challenge the legitimacy of the Zhuangzi text as a form of philosophy as it does the conventional notion of philosophical discourse, of what counts as philosophy. I had no doubt that after reading Zhuangzi and Plato in the context of a philosophical critique of language, the students would emerge from such cross-cultural readings with a new perspective, an expanded vision, and an open-minded appreciation of the diversity of forms that a particular theme or topic might take in the rich treasury of world literature.

Zhuangzi and Plato are both saying that the truth of things is not easily accessible through language, that words are just inadequate pointers leading you to a reality that lies beyond language. The Chan Buddhists use a famous metaphor for this idea in likening the domain of

language and reality to the relationship between a finger and the moon that the finger points to. For example, the *Lankāvatāra Sutra*, an important Mahayana Buddhist scripture, speaks of a foolish man who only looks at the finger but not at the moon it points to. The same metaphor also appears in another Buddhist text, the *Sūrangama Sūtra*, in which Buddha tells Ānanda, 'You are still using your clinging mind to listen to the Dharma ... This is like a man pointing a finger at the moon to show it to others who should follow the direction of the finger to look at the moon. If they look at the finger and mistake it for the moon, they lose (sight of) both the moon and the finger.'[4] 'According to Zen,' D.T. Suzuki explains, 'there is no struggle in the fact itself such as between the finite and the infinite, between the flesh and the spirit. These are idle distinctions fictitiously designed by the intellect for its own interest. Those who take them too seriously or those who try to read them into the very fact of life are those who take the finger for the moon.'[5] Looking at the finger but ignoring the moon thus becomes an unmistakably Chan Buddhist metaphor for the ignorance of those who cannot understand the undifferentiated nature of things beyond the phenomenal world with all its superficial distinctions.

In a totally different context, however, that same metaphor takes on a surprisingly Augustinian colouring when it is used to illustrate the problems in understanding the Holy Scriptures. At the beginning of his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*, St Augustine makes the disclaimer that he should not be held responsible for any lack of understanding on the part of some readers. 'I am not to blame because they do not understand,' says Augustine.

> In the same way, if they wished to see the old and the new moon or some very small star which I was pointing to with my finger and they did not have keen enough sight even to see my finger, they should not on that account become angry with me. And those who have studied and learned these precepts and still do not understand the obscurities of the Holy Scriptures think that they can see my finger but not the heavenly bodies which it was intended to point out. But both of these groups should stop blaming me and ask God to give them vision. Although I can lift my finger to point something out, I cannot supply the vision by means of which either this gesture or what it indicates can be seen.[6]

The similarity here is remarkable, for Augustine's use of the metaphor has no relation with that same metaphor in Buddhist sutras. And yet, the coincidence is not totally fortuitous because the metaphor of the finger and the moon serves the purpose of emphasizing the spiritual object of contemplation as opposed to a physical one, which is of course a point shared by many religious writers, be it Buddhist or Christian. For our purposes here, however, I may offer yet another reading of this interesting metaphor or image. Those who approach this image only in the context of Eastern writings may think that the finger and the moon are specifically Buddhist, while those who find the same image in St Augustine may consider it uniquely Christian. From a broader perspective of reading across cultures, however, both these approaches seem too narrow in their visions; both are looking only at the finger, as it were, without realizing that the specificity of the finger is only a partial and limited understanding,

whereas the moon shining above both and all fingers is much more encompassing and should lift up our eyes towards the liberality and capaciousness of the mind that truly understands the full range of human creativity.

To be able to see beyond the limitations of local and parochial views is always a joy and is valuable in itself; it definitely has the positive effect of opening our minds to the numerous possibilities of different literary forms that nevertheless come together to reveal some extraordinary affinity of the mind and imagination. Such cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary readings should also open our minds to forms of writing that may challenge a narrow definition of literature. I have so far quoted Plato, Zhuangzi, Buddhist sutras, and Augustine – that is, philosophical and religious texts – but these texts are quoted for their similar questioning of the efficacy of language or the use of a particular metaphor, which are both crucial to what we normally think of as literature. The philosophical or religious texts I have quoted all have a certain literary quality, and they provide important backgrounds against which many works of literature can be brought into a better light for adequate understanding.

To be sure, the idea of 'literary quality' is difficult to define precisely, but it is the quality of good writing that makes effective use of metaphors and other rhetorical devices, carrying a force of persuasion by logical cogency or emotional appeal, or both. Such a quality does not exclusively reside in a narrowly defined literary text like a poem, a novel, or a play, but great works of literature, especially great poetry, are indeed most exemplary of the quality of good writing. Walter Pater has argued that

though each art has its specific order of impressions, 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.'[7] What that means is not that art should be completely free from ideas or themes or subject matter, but that form and matter should become one, such that in their union or identity they 'present one single effect to the "imaginative reason," that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol.'[8] If we understand the perfect blending of form and matter as the quality of art, which is also the quality of good writing, then, perhaps we may say that all forms of writing aspire towards the condition of poetry, even though they may not be poetry or literature narrowly defined.

In that sense, then, philosophy, religion, history, and literature are not mutually exclusive, as literature takes all aspects of life as its object of representation. The poet Mallarmé may have been right when he told Edgar Degas, 'Ce n'est point avec des idées, mon cher Degas, que l'on fait des vers. C'est avec des mots.'[9] It may be true that one writes poems with words, not with ideas, but Degas also has a point in seeking ideas for making poetry, whereas Mallarmé's own poems are certainly not mere meaningless babble. Thematic substance or ideas in a literary text become particularly important on the level of world literature, which, as David Damrosch argues, necessarily lifts a literary text out of its local moorings and makes it 'circulat[e] out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin.'[10] That is to say, what appeals to the reader in a work of world literature is not pure linguistic ingenuity, either in its original form or conveyed to

various degrees in translation, but the attractiveness of its thematic content, the idea that perfectly manifests itself in felicitous language and exquisite poetic expressions.

The metaphor of the finger and the moon is interesting because a philosophical and religious idea is conveyed in a beautifully simple image, in which the idea and its metaphorical expression, matter and form, or thought and language, are so closely intertwined that it becomes almost pointless to make a distinction. As George Lakoff and Mark Turner argue, 'metaphor resides in thought, not just in words.'[11] In the case of the finger and the moon, we have what they identify as 'the basic UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING metaphor: what enables you to see is metaphorically what enables you to understand.'[12] They also maintain that such basic metaphors 'are part of the common conceptual apparatus shared by members of a culture.'[13] But what adds to the attractiveness of this particular metaphor is precisely the uncanny coincidence of its presence not just in one culture, but across cultures, in works from the East and the West that are otherwise radically different. When such unexpected coincidence occurs, there is indeed a sense of pleasure in the discovery of surprising similarities in very different texts.

If culturally, and not just geographically, East and West are thought to be at the opposite ends of the world, the coincidence of linguistic formulations – the unexpected similarity of thematic substance manifested in similar forms of expression – would perhaps give us the best evidence of what truly deserves the name of *world* literature. Perhaps that is why Claudio Guillén speaks of East-West studies with such enthusiasm as an area of potential

growth for comparative literature, where comparative work becomes all the more exciting in spite of, or rather, because of, enormous cultural differences. 'This lack of genetic relations, of mutual influences,' says Guillén, 'is precisely what stimulates a whole series of practical and theoretical perplexities of great interest.'[14] Reading literature across cultures East and West is therefore not merely about going beyond Eurocentrism or replacing the Western canon with non-Western works; the point of reading across cultures is to reach a truly global vision of human creativity, and only from such a broad perspective can we fully appreciate literary works and forms in all their diversities, and appreciate them not as isolated monads sealed off from one another, but as expressions of themes and ideas that are deeply connected, even though manifested in different languages and cultures.

To illustrate the point with literary examples, let us look at a basic conceptual metaphor that compares the experience of life to a journey with its twists and turns, which Lakoff and Turner have also discussed with reference to Western literature.[15] One of the best-known examples in European literature is the beginning of Dante's *Divine Comedy*:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
che la diritta via era smarrita.

Half way in the journey of our life,
I found myself in a dark forest,
for I had lost the right road ahead.

The image of a man lost in 'a dark forest' because he has taken a wrong turn on the road is Dante's metaphorical way of saying that one is likely to be led astray by dangerous temptations in life, symbolized by the three wild beasts that confront him in this dark forest at the beginning of the poem. In fact, the entire *Divine Comedy* is structured as a long journey, both physical and spiritual, leading from Inferno to Purgatory and finally to Paradise. Many great narratives, particularly those dealing with the archetypal theme of a quest, often have journey as their basic structural metaphor. In the Western tradition, there are many stories about spiritual quest in the form of a physical journey, such as St Augustine's *Confessions*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, legends about the Holy Grail, and what Northrop Frye sees as the two concentric quest-myths in the Bible – first, Adam's fall out of Eden, the wandering in 'the labyrinth of human history,' and his final restoration by the Messiah; and second, the loss of Israel, the wandering in 'the labyrinths of Egyptian and Babylonian captivity,' and the final restoration in 'the Promised Land.'[16] Both symbolic and historical narratives are thus conceived as a quest, a journey leading from captivity to freedom, and history, like life itself, can be seen metaphorically as a long journey. It is perhaps this basic metaphor that invigorates Milton's poetry with a particularly moving pathos and rhetorical power when he ends *Paradise Lost* with the depiction of Adam and Eve being driven out of the Garden of Eden, and embarking on the difficult journey of an uncertain future, confronted with death and the challenge of a fallen life:

> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
> They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow
> Through Eden took their solitary way.

However, not only Dante and Milton, but poets and writers in many other traditions have also used the metaphor of life as a journey. In Chinese literature, a famous example is *Journey to the West*, which describes, on the literal level, the physical journey taken by the Tang monk Tripitaka, accompanied by his three disciples, chief among them the Monkey King, to fetch Buddhist sutras in India. On the metaphorical or allegorical level, this sixteenth-century Chinese novel tells the fascinating story of a spiritual quest, the search for understanding and enlightenment couched in the language of Buddhism, old myths, and popular legends. Anthony Yu has compared the *Journey to the West* with Dante's *Commedia* in terms of religious pilgrimage, and argues that the Chinese narrative 'can be read on at least three levels, as a tale of physical travel and adventure, as a story of Buddhist *karma* and redemption, and as an allegory of philosophical and alchemical self-cultivation.'[17] Life as a journey is indeed a very basic conceptual metaphor that appears in various traditions of world literature.

From the basic *life is a journey* metaphor, many related ideas have developed and the range of metaphorical coverage enlarged. For example, to be born can be thought of as setting out on a journey, death can be seen as reaching the journey's end, and life itself can be conceptualized as temporarily dwelling in a roadside inn. Here is a poem

from the famous *Rubáiyát* by the Persian poet Omar Khayyám (in Edward Fitzgerald's translation), in which the brevity of life is vividly expressed by using the metaphor of a roadside inn, for life is a momentary visit, a brief stay, and then the traveller is gone, never to return:

And, as the Cock crew, those who stood before
The Tavern shouted – 'Open then the Door!
  You know how little while we have to stay,
And, once departed, may return no more.'

In book 3 of *Palamon and Arcite*, John Dryden also uses the image of a tavern or inn as a temporary dwelling in the metaphor of life as a journey:

Like pilgrims to th' appointed place we tread;
The world's an inn, and death the journey's end.

In a poem by Li Bai (701–62), one of China's greatest poets, we find a remarkably similar expression:

Those who live are passers-by,
Those dead are back at home.
Heaven and earth are but an inn,
All to dust will mournfully come.[18]

Like all good writings in classical Chinese, with these words the poet alluded to a rich subtext of earlier works, reaching back to illustrious predecessors in an intertextuality of poetic images and metaphors. Li Bai's first two lines here recall a metaphor in the Taoist book *Liezi*: 'The

dead are those who have returned home, so those alive are travellers.'[19] The idea that heaven and earth serve as an inn for the traveller alludes to a group of famous anonymous texts dating back to the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), known as *Nineteen Ancient Poems*, in which the metaphor of life as a journey is rather prominent. Number 3 of these poems has these lines:

> Men living between heaven and earth
> Are transient as travellers on a long journey.[20]

In poem number 13 we find the same idea expressed with a similar metaphor:

> The sun and the moon are on constant move,
> Like dew we come and are quickly gone.
> Life's like staying in a temporary shelter
> And never endures like metal or stone.[21]

Li Bai writes elsewhere 'Heaven and earth is the inn for all creatures, and time is a passer-by of all generations. Fleeting life is like a dream, of which how many are truly happy moments? So it was with good reason that the ancients would hold candles and go on outings during the night.'[22] In the last sentence, he specifically alludes to number 15 of the *Nineteen Ancient Poems*, in which the sorrowful recognition of the brevity of life and the anxiety and countless troubles one endures in life lead to a strong desire to make the best of every single moment, and thus encourage a kind of desperately joyful carnival spirit similar to the *carpe diem* theme in many Western works:

A man's life does not reach a hundred,
But filled with a thousand years' worry.
The day is too short and the night long,
Why not go with a candle and be merry?[23]

The celebratory tone of this poem is sharply different from that of works that are strongly religious in intent and treat life as a sort of miserable sojourn, tolerable only in view of final salvation in God's grace. Thus Henry Vaughan's (1621?–95) traveller in 'The Pilgrimage' stays sleepless in the tavern, 'full of tossings too and fro,' mourning and hanging his head, and appeals to God to sustain him till the final moment:

O feed me then! and since I may
Have yet more days, more nights to Count,
So strengthen me, Lord, all the way,
That I may travel to thy Mount.

Such a strong religious sentiment is rarely found in classical Chinese literature, in which the poet tends to accept life and death with a tranquil mind, without appealing to a divine validation. Here we do find one of the important cultural differences between Chinese and Western literatures, but again, this is a difference of degree, not of kind, of religiosity and such differences are not distributed along the geographical or cultural borderlines of the East and the West.

Let us, for example, look at the works of Tao Yuanming, whose poem about the true meaning of nature was discussed towards the end of the last chapter. In many of

his poems, we find the same basic metaphor that compares life to a journey. Tao's poetry is distinguished by its richness in simplicity, as his language is always simple but elegant, and his imagery natural but sophisticated. In a poem that speaks metaphorically of human mortality as a temporary stay, the poet says:

> Life is like staying in a shelter,
> At times one feels sick and weak.[24]

The frailty of life is compared to momentary weakness or illness on a long journey, but the poet speaks in peace and tranquillity and accepts such frailty as part of the experience of life. In another poem, the metaphor of life as journey is developed further, with the implication that death is the final destination:

> Home is but a room in a small inn,
> And I, a mere departing guest.
> Whither am I when I leave? You ask –
> An old house on southern hills to rest.[25]

Here 'a room in a small inn' alludes to a phrase in the book of *Liezi* that 'living at home is like staying in a room of a small inn.'[26] Tao Yuanming has a peculiar piece entitled 'Self-Obituary,' in which he imagined his own death, saying that 'Mr. Tao is about to leave the small inn he stays in and return permanently to his own home.'[27] From these allusions and textual evidence, commentators have concluded that the 'old house on southern hills' in the lines quoted above is a tomb, the eventual resting

place in death. In this poem, the sojourner's voice is calm and content, and the serenity in having made peace with death is achieved without a religious conviction.

The acceptance of death expressed here may perhaps remind us of the famous song in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (4.2.258):

Fear no more the heat o' th' sun
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task has done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

Fear no more the frown o' th' great,
Thou art past the tyrant's stroke;
To thee the reed is as the oak.
The sceptre, learning, physic, must
All follow this and come to dust.

Thus, the basic *life is a journey* metaphor may have a variety of formulations, each in some way unique and different from all others. Those differences, however, do not fall neatly along the lines of a simple East-West divide or the boundaries of cultural identities. In fact, members of the same culture may hold very different views and argue with one another, while agreement may sometimes come from people faraway or long ago, living under very different cultural and social conditions. Indeed, sometimes we may find Shakespeare closer in spirit to the Chinese poet Tao Yuanming than to his fellow countryman Henry Vaughan, enveloped in an intense Christian spiritualism.

Of course, to recognize similarities in the use of metaphors by poets from the East and the West does not compel us to ignore cultural differences, but reading across cultures does enable us to appreciate world literature with a spirit of openess and sympathetic understanding, and to acquire a broad perspective for discerning thematic affinities and patterns of literary imagination beyond the gaps of languages and cultures.

Sometimes, the cross-cultural perspective may change the way we look at texts and help us better appreciate literary themes and poetic images. Let us consider here a particular image – that of the pearl – in literature. John Keats, among English poets, loved that image, and a quick check of several concordances confirms that he used the image of the pearl more frequently than any of his contemporary poets. Often the pearl in a Keats poem is already metaphorical in the sense that it is used to describe tears or dewdrops rather than referring to jewellery. Here is an example from 'Calidore: A Fragment':

And whether there were tears of languishment,
Or that the evening dew had pearl'd their tresses,
He feels a moisture on his cheek.

In another example, from *Endymion*, the poet compares dewdrops with tears of love by using the pearl image:

the pearliest dew not brings
Such morning incense from the fields of May,
As do those brighter drops that twinkling stray
From those kind eyes, – the very home and haunt
Of sisterly affection.

In a later passage we find again the metaphorical use of the image of the pearl as tear, though in this case it is a tear of happiness:

This may sound strangely: but when, dearest girl,
Thou seest it for my happiness, no pearl
Will trespass down those cheeks.

Of course, Keats is not the only poet to use the pearl as a metaphor. Among the more memorable examples of such usage, we have Shakespeare's Puck singing, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2.1.14),

I must go seek some dewdrops here,
And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear.

This image of the pearl used metaphorically to portray tears or dewdrops happens to be a commonplace in Chinese literature as well, as quite a few poets used 'pearly tears' particularly in describing the loneliness and lovesickness of ladies or unfortunate lovers. For example, Li Bai writes about the loneliness of a soldier's wife who is thinking of her husband stationed in a garrison so far away that not even a wild goose, which in the Chinese poetic iconography is a messenger bird, could carry a letter back. The poet writes:

Her thoughts of him float afar like dreams,
And pearly tears wet her gown of gossamer silk.[28]

In poems about unrequited passion, unhappy lovers certainly shed lots of 'pearly tears.' In a poem about a

lovesick lady, however, Bai Juyi (772–846), also a poet of the Tang dynasty, gives an innovative twist to the rather common image of the pearl as tear, for the lady tells her lover:

> Do not dye the thin slender silk,
> And praise its colour so beautifully red;
> For in both my eyes are pearls of tear
> That you cannot string with a thread.[29]

The image of stringing pearls of tear with a thread, or the impossibility of doing that, makes the use of the pearl as a metaphor more ingenious and interesting, and gives this poem its special charm.

For all their elegance, ingenuity, and richness of expression, however, these examples of the metaphorical use of the pearl image remain relatively simple. After all, the comparisons of pearls to tears or dewdrops are not all that striking, since all are built on such obvious features as their round shape, the softness or moisture, the glossy sheen on their surface, and so forth. Indeed, the image of the pearl is so common in poetry that it is not given much attention either in Keats scholarship or in more general discussions of poetic imagery or metaphors. Taken in isolation, each of these examples does not seem that impressive, but before we give up the metaphor as too common and obvious, let us take a look at some famous lines by the Chinese poet Li Shangyin (813?–58), in which the images of pearls and tears also appear:

> Over the green sea the moon shines, pearls are shedding tears;

On Blue Fields the sun warms, the jade gives out a rising smoke.[30]

In these lines of rich colours and images, let us focus again on the pearl image. Some commentators have argued that this poem, which is habitually put at the beginning of Li Shangyin's collected works, can be read as a sort of poetic preface, as the poet's commentary on his own art. This is an interesting argument, and following that line one can read the image of the pearl as a symbol of poetry, a self-referential metaphor for the very poetry of which images and metaphors are constituent parts. We may notice that instead of saying 'pearls are like tears,' the poet says, 'pearls are shedding tears.' According to Qian Zhongshu (1910–98), perhaps the most learned scholar in modern China, who offers us the best guidance for understanding this poem, the specific image here suggests that 'what have turned into pearls are still warm as tears, valuable as treasure but still quivering with sorrow, precious as jewel but imbued with human sensibilities.' This is of course to speak metaphorically of the nature of poetry, because the image of the pearl here means that poetry, 'though polished to a shiny perfection, must reveal true feelings and be energized with freshness and vitality, different from those ornate and overly clever pieces that have lost all natural appeal of simplicity.'[31] In such a metaphorical reading, the image of 'pearls shedding tears' thus articulates a principle of poetics, a statement about what poetry ideally should be.

Qian Zhongshu points out that Chinese poets of the Tang dynasty often used pearls and jade as metaphors for

poetry. This is certainly a new sort of metaphorical use of the image of the pearl, no longer linked to tears or dewdrops. We can substantiate this claim with textual evidence. In a famous couplet, the great Tang poet Du Fu (712–70) writes:

> Back from the imperial audience, fragrance filled sleeves of my robe;
> When a poem is composed, pearls and jade rolled from the writing brush.[32]

Pearls and jade rolling from the brush constitute a fantastic new image, a metaphor for the act of writing poetry. Thus, upon receiving poems from his friends, Bai Juyi writes:

> Pearls and jade arrive to bring me new poems;
> Young phoenixes remind me of old friends.[33]

It is traditionally a common practice among scholars in China to exchange newly composed poems as gifts or as letters to one another. Thus, Bai Juyi describes a friend often engaged in such exchange as one who

> Seeks only pearls and jade in poetry,
> And often sends them to the imperial city.[34]

In these examples from Tang poetry, pearls and jade become a commonly used poetic metaphor that symbolizes poetry itself. The image of the pearl as a metaphor for poetry is not uniquely Chinese, however. As quoted by

Qian Zhongshu, Hugo von Hofmannsthal once 'described Heine's poems as brighter and more enduring than pearls, but with light and moisture as living creatures (unverweslicher als Perlen / Und leuchtender, zuweilen ein Gebilde: / Das traget am lebendigen Leib, und nie / Verliert es seinen innern feuchten Glanz).' In meaning and imagery Hofmannsthal's lines are remarkably similar to those of the Chinese poet Li Shangyin quoted above. And, after quoting Hofmannsthal, Qian Zhongshu asks: 'Isn't this pearls shedding tears? '[35] Qian also observes that the French poet Alfred de Musset 'conceptualizes poetry as "making a pearl out of a tear" (Faire une perle d'une larme), turning all emotions into language that will survive and immortalize all dreams and ideas (éterniser un rêve et fixer la pensée).'[36] When we realize that the image of the pearl can be used as a metaphor for poetry, then, not only can we make better sense of Li Shangyin's famously ambiguous lines, but we also have a new appreciation of the pearl as a poetic metaphor. In effect, we acquire a new perspective and a new sensibility to read the image of pearl as symbolic of poetry itself.

But how does this metaphor work conceptually? In what ways are poems comparable to pearls? Unlike the comparison with tears or dewdrops, the metaphorical relationship here is not obvious, for it is *not* the idea that both poetry and pearls are valuable or precious that justifies the comparison. In this case, it is in some classical Chinese texts that we may find some clue to the answer. An encyclopedia compiled in the seventh century during the Tang dynasty quotes the Prince of Huainan as saying: 'The pearl as bright as the moon is beneficial to us, but for

the oyster it is the result of a disease.'[37] This is quite an interesting idea that demands a shift of perspective so that we may see things differently. From the human point of view, the pearl is valuable, but for the oyster it is the result of a painful experience, a disease, because a pearl is produced when a grain of sand or other foreign object gets into the shell of an oyster, and the poor thing has to wrap it up with a secretion. This idea is taken up by the fifth-century Chinese critic Liu Xie (465?–522) in his famous work *The Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons*, where he argues that a great work of literature is produced out of the author's painful lived experience, and such works are 'like pearls that come out of the disease of suffering oysters.'[38] So now we understand that the metaphorical relationship between pearls and poems is not based on the product, but on the process of production: just like the oyster that produces a shining pearl out of its disease, the poet creates a beautiful piece of literature out of suffering and painful experiences.

In Emerson's essay 'Compensation' we find an eloquent articulation of that same idea. 'Human labor, through all its forms,' says Emerson, 'from the sharpening of a stake to the construction of a city or an epic, is one immense illustration of the perfect compensation of the universe.'[39] Out of something bad, good things will emerge. Like the Chinese writers quoted above, Emerson used the images of the pearl and the oyster to express a similar sense of natural balance or equilibrium. The poet suffers, but, says Emerson, 'like the wounded oyster, he mends his shell with pearl.'[40] The tragic seems to win over readers and audiences more easily than the comic,

and poems speaking of sorrow and melancholia seem more effective in touching us than songs in celebration of happy events. Or, as Shelley puts it, 'Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.'

We must, however, credit Qian Zhongshu with the best elucidation of this idea in an engaging argument in which he makes it a central theme diversely manifested in world literature. For him, that central theme is succinctly expressed by Confucius in the *Analects* when the Master says that 'poetry can give vent to grievances.'[41] In ancient China, says Qian, the idea that the best poetry is the result of sorrow or painful lived experience 'is not only a commonplace of poetic theory, but also a convention in the practice of writing.'[42] With a wealth of concrete examples from both Chinese and Western sources, Qian makes a convincing case for the prevalence of this idea in world literature and, most interestingly for our purposes here, he gathers together a number of texts that express this idea by using the image of the pearl. In addition to Liu Xie's phrase that great works are 'like pearls that come out of the disease of suffering oysters,' Qian also quotes Liu Zhou (514–65), who used four consecutive metaphors to express the idea that hardship best activates an author's literary talents: 'With congealed sap, old trees form knots of elaborate patterns; owing to illness, oyster and nacre hold pearls as bright as the moon; frightened birds can soar above blue clouds; startled arrow can fly over snow-capped mountains; owing to their misfortune, all produce something precious with wonderful patterns, and all move upward because of some pricking or stimulation.'[43] Qian Zhongshu goes on to say:

> When Western writers talk about literature, their use of metaphor is remarkably coincidental with that of the Chinese. Franz Grillparzer remarks that poetry is like a pearl, the product of a sick and silent shell-fish (*die Perle, das Erzeugnis des kranken stillen Muscheltieres*); Flaubert observes that a pearl is formed in the illness of the oyster (*la perle est une maladie de l'huître*), while the style of a writer flows out of a deeper sorrow (*l'écoulement d'une douleur plus profounde*). Heine wonders whether poetry is to man what the pearl is to the poor oyster, the stuff of illness that makes it suffer (*wie die Perle, die Krankheitsstoff, woran das arme Austertier leidet*). A.E. Housman maintains that poetry is a sort of 'secretion; whether a natural secretion, like the turpentine in the fir, or a morbid secretion, like the pearl in the oyster.' Apparently such a metaphor is found everywhere and used by all writers independently of one another, because it expresses precisely the idea that 'poetry gives vent to grievances,' and that it is 'produced under the pressure of suffering or misfortune.'[44]

With this understanding of the pearl as a symbol of poetry, we may now turn back to Keats with a new sensibility and a greater appreciation for his frequent use of the pearl image. We may now sense the poet's creative transformation of sorrow into the beauty of poetry when we read his tender apostrophe to the moon:

> thou art a relief
> To the poor patient oyster, where it sleeps
> Within its pearly house.

When we read these lines, we may mentally connect the 'poor patient oyster' and 'its pearly house' to the poet and his works. We can also appreciate Shelley's use of the image in his elegy on the death of Keats, in which Shelley personifies dreams created by Keats coming to mourn the dead poet like a flight of angels, and one of these angelic figures, as Shelley describes her,

> clipt her profuse locks, and threw
> The wreath upon him, like an anadem,
> Which frozen tears instead of pearls begem.

As all these angelic figures are the poet's own creations, so are their 'frozen tears' that 'begem' the wreath like pearls on the poet's forehead. As Shelley imagined, Keats's own poetic works become angels shedding pearly tears to mourn his death, and it is indeed in the poet's own creation that he will be best remembered. Here again, we may detect a close association of the image of the pearl with Keats's own poetry.

In the elegiac tone of the poem, the use of the pearl image as a symbol of poetry on the basis of a tragic sense of the relationship between life and art makes us realize the cathartic effect of poetry. In death, the poet and his suffering become richer and more beautiful, and we are here reminded of Ariel's song in Shakespeare's *Tempest* (1.2.399):

> Those are pearls that were his eyes:
> Nothing of him that doth fade,
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange.

The idea that the best and the most powerful poetry touches the heart because it is produced out of the poet's painful lived experience – just as the pearl is produced out of the pain of a poor oyster – offers a more interesting and more complex metaphor than pearls as tears or drewdrops.

What is important here is that we are able to come to understand the significant symbolic meaning of the pearl image only when we have put specific examples from Chinese and European literatures together in a cross-cultural perspective. We make connections among different textual references to the image of the pearl from Li Shangyin, Liu Xie, and the other Chinese poets and writers to Keats, Emerson, Hofmannsthal, Musset, Grillparzer, Flaubert, Heine, and Housman, following the Chinese scholar Qian Zhongshu's argument in elucidating a prominent idea in traditional Chinese criticism, the Confucian notion that poetry provides an outlet for suffering and grievances.

If we recall Northrop Frye's metaphor for archetypal criticism as standing back from the canvas to see the pictorial pattern and design, and Wittgenstein's metaphor of climbing up the ladder in search of true understanding and comprehension, we may say that we can arrive at a better understanding of the image of the pearl only when we have stood back, or climbed up, a sufficient distance from isolated individual texts and textual details. At the same time, however, the understanding we have gained at a critical distance allows us to return to individual texts and see them in a new light, with a keener sensibility and greater appreciation. In that sense, then, reading across cultures will make it possible for us to see the connection

of literary works, to explore poetic images and literary themes with the exciting sense of a new discovery, as though we are seeing and understanding some of the great works of literature for the first time, and in ways that are not available when we are boxed up in the narrow mental space of cultural dichotomy and parochialism. Indeed, reading across cultures will make us better readers.

NOTES

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40 Ibid., 298.

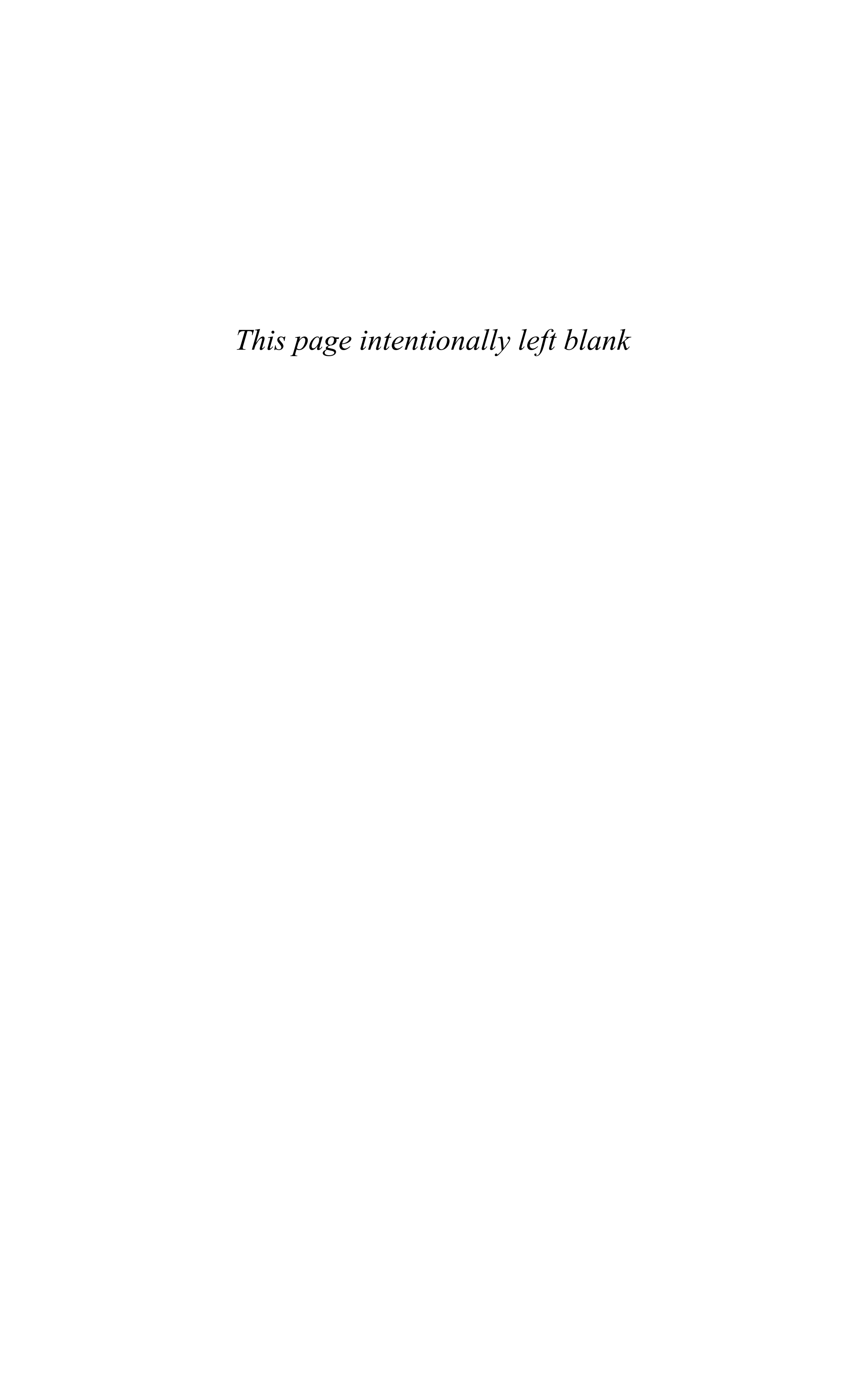
41 Liu Baonan (1791–1855), *Lunyu zhengyi* [*The Correct Meaning of the Analects*], in vol. 1 of *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Distinguished Philosophical Works*] (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1954), xvii.9, p. 374.

42 Qian Zhongshu, 'Our sweetest songs,' in *Qi zhui ji* [*Collection of Seven Essays*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1985), 102.

43 Ibid., 103.

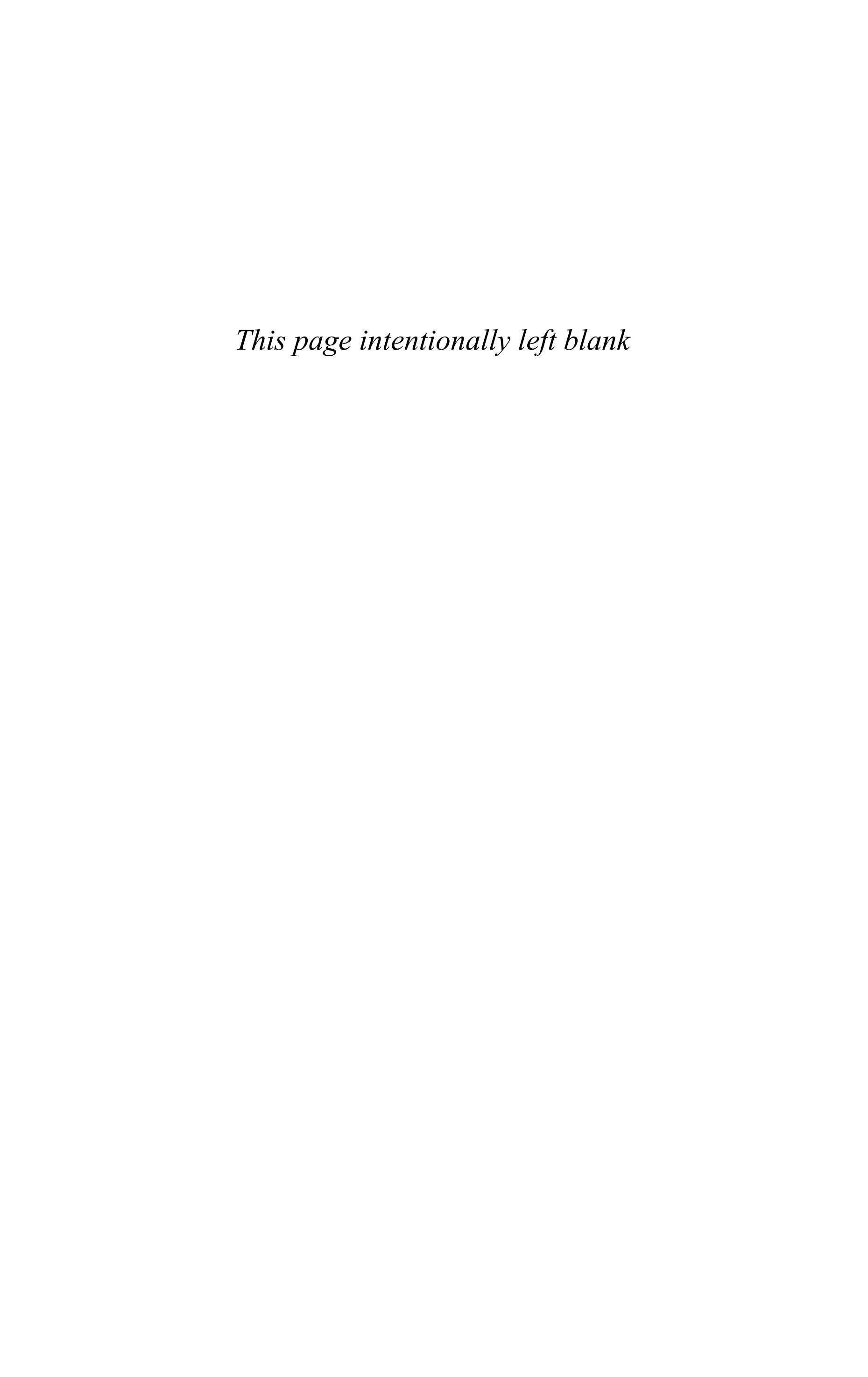
44 Ibid., 104. For the lines from Grillparzer and Flaubert, Qian Zhong-

shu quoted from Walter Muschg, *Tragische Literaturgeschichte*, 3rd ed. (1957), 415. For Heine, he quoted from *Die romantische Schule*, book 2, section iv. For Housman, he quoted from *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, in *A.E. Housman: Selected Prose*, ed. John Carter, (1961), 194.


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CHAPTER THREE

'Within the infant rind of this weak flower': The Ambivalence of Poison and Medicine



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Sometimes the pleasure of reading across cultures is a sense of discovery, the pleasure of finding unexpected affinities of ideas and expressions in different texts. The greater the difference, the more surprising and more satisfying the affinities will be. It is like bouncing texts and ideas against one another to see what will happen from such interactions. Texts from East and West differ in many ways, influenced by their specific philosophical, social, and political circumstances, but whatever their difference, texts, as Milton's Archangel Raphael says of all creatures, are '[d]ifferent but in degree, of kind the same' (*Paradise Lost*, 5.490). Textual details are matters of degree, but literary themes are matters of kind.

The themes I want to explore in this chapter are representations of the human body and medical treatment of the body, remedy and poison, understood figuratively or allegorically. The text with which I begin is not literary in nature, but a collection of observations and memoirs put together as a sort of monologue, a curious book by the erudite eleventh-century Chinese scholar Shen Kuo (1031–95), whom Joseph Needham describes as 'one of the most widely interested scientific minds which China produced in any age.'[1] The book has more than six hundred entries of miscellaneous notes, covering everything from anecdotes, social customs, mathematics, medicine, music, the arts, technologies, and inventions to legends and supernatural stories. As the author tells us in the preface, the book was written when he was alone in retirement, with no one to talk to except his own writing brush; and so he named his book *bi tan*, that is, 'conversations with a writing brush.'[2]

An interesting entry in that book tells a tragicomic story. Shen Kuo had a cousin who was apparently interested in alchemy and used to experiment with some friends to make an elixir by heating cinnabar in a cauldron. One day, a small lump of cinnabar was dropped on the ground and was picked up by one of the servants. Mistaking it for the wondrous drug, the servant swallowed it, but he quickly fell into delirium and died the very next day. In commenting on this unfortunate death, Shen Kuo writes: 'Cinnabar is an extremely beneficial medicine that can be administered even to a new-born baby. It must be the force of fire that changed its nature and made it lethal.' He then goes on to reflect on the changing nature of this medicinal substance and realizes that cinnabar can be either therapeutic or toxic: 'Speaking of its capability to change, if it can turn into a deadly poison, it can also change to do great good; if it can change to kill, it is only reasonable to expect that it can also give life.'[3] Thus life and death, medicine and poison, are but two sides of the same coin, and it takes only a small step to cross the line from one into the other.

The idea that medicine and poison, or therapeutic and lethal functions, are related to one another in the same substance is also the point Shen Kuo made in another story, but this time, it is a comic story with a happy ending. In the region of Zhangzhou, says Shen Kuo, 'there is a river known as "Foot-Blackening Stream," because anyone who steps in the river will have his feet dyed inky black. The river runs for dozens of miles, but its water is not suitable for drinking. Anyone who drinks from it will fall ill, so travellers would all carry their own

water bags when they go there.' Now a scholar-official was appointed to the county office in the area and had to cross the dreaded river. The man was physically frail, suffering from a number of diseases, and so he was terribly worried about the 'Foot-Blackening Stream.' What happened next is rather amusing:

> When he reached that river, he had several men carrying him on their shoulders and had his body completely covered up for fear of being splashed by the poisonous water. Overly cautious and tense with anxiety, however, he suddenly fell into the river and was completely submerged by the water. When he came out of it, his whole person was as black as a black man from Kunlun, and he thought himself dead. But after that, all his old diseases were gone, and he felt like a healthy man with none of the frailties in his past. No one knows why it was so.[4]

Here again is a strange reversal of effects and expectations; if in the earlier story, the beneficial cinnabar turns into a deadly poison, then in this story, the dreaded river that is poisonous to healthy people proves to be a miraculous cure for a person suffering from many diseases. In both cases, however, the medicinal and the poisonous, good and bad, are all bound up in the same substance as opposite functions.

The story of the 'Foot-Blackening Stream' is interesting not just for the reversal of poison and medicine, but also for suggesting some kind of a moral or an allegory, particularly when we read it from a cross-cultural perspective. Angus Fletcher argues that '[c]ontagion is the primary

symbol of Christian allegory since that allegory is chiefly concerned with sin and redemption.'[5] Shen Kuo's story about the 'Foot-Blackening Stream' does not suggest anything religious, as the man in the story was physically frail rather than morally or spiritually weak, but it does share with Christian allegory the symbolic imagery of contagion, contamination, pollution, and final restoration. Paradoxically, by falling into the poisonous river, the man is cured of all his old diseases and becomes purified. The 'Foot-Blackening Stream' thus suggests something like the purgatory in Christian allegory that purifies through a horrific process of torture and pain, though the intent here is different than in the Christian allegory. Or it may suggest something similar to homoeopathy, the curing of a disease by attacking it with the same kind of poisonous stuff that causes the disease.

Fletcher reminds us by quoting Owsei Temkin that 'the Latin word *infectio* means a dyeing, a staining or coloring,' and that '[t]he root meaning of this word (*inficere*) is to put or dip into something, especially a poison; or to stain something in the sense that it becomes tainted, spoiled, or corrupted.'[6] Doesn't that sound like a good description of what the 'Foot-Blackening Stream' does to normal people, namely, dyeing, colouring, staining, and contaminating? As Shen Kuo puts it, 'anyone who steps in the river will have his feet dyed inky black,' and 'anyone who drinks from it will fall ill,' that is, become infected. But the Chinese story ends with a surprising twist: the unexpected curing effect the poisonous river has on a sick person. Here the moral or allegorical meaning, if there is any in the story, is largely unspecified, and

the dialectic of the toxic and the therapeutic remains undeveloped. That dialectic, however, had long been recognized in the Chinese tradition, and in writing about the reversal of poison and medicine, Shen Kuo was not without predecessors.

More than two hundred years before Shen Kuo, Liu Yuxi (772–842), a well-known poet and writer of the Tang dynasty, had a short piece entitled 'Lesson Learned from Medicine.' In an autobiographical tone, Liu speaks of his experience of seeing a doctor when he fell ill, lost all appetite, and suffered from fever and dizziness. Typically of a medical doctor in China, the man felt his pulse, looked at the colour of his tongue, and listened to his voice, and then came to his diagnosis by putting the three observations together. 'Your illness is due to irregularities in your daily routines and your intake of food,' said the doctor. 'Now your stomach can hardly digest grains, and your intestines can hardly nurture vital energies, and that makes your body a bag of diseases.' The doctor took out a pellet of medicine and gave it to Liu, saying, 'Taking this will rid you of fever and dizziness, disperse the blockage, kill vicious germs and recover your depleted energies. But it has poison in it, so you must stop medication when you are cured of the disease. Any overuse will be harmful, so you should take small doses.' Following the simple instruction and allowing the drug to take its course, Liu was completely cured within a month.

At that point, however, someone told Liu that it was the habit of doctors to 'keep secret some of their techniques to mark up their worth and deliberately leave some residue of the disease uncured to milk more money

from the patient.' Misled by these words, Liu did not stop the medication and took more of the effective drug, but in five more days, he was seriously ill again and realized that the overdose was killing him with poison. He immediately went to see the doctor, who reprimanded him, but gave him an antidote to bring him back from the brink of disaster. 'How wonderful is the art of curing!' said Liu in gratitude. 'Now I understand that it uses poison to attack the disease and uses tonic to appease the spirit, and both will fail if the balance is altered. If one rigidly follows the routine in dealing with the changing situation and does not understand the proper rhythm of tension and relaxation, then how much greater the failure will be than just the mismanagement of our own bodies!'[7] Here the prominent idea is again the dialectic of poison and medicine, the totally different functions of a substance that can either kill or cure, all depending on how one keeps the delicate balance.

The lesson Liu Yuxi drew from the antithetical duality of medicine obviously goes beyond the minor problem of 'mismanagement of our own bodies.' In traditional Chinese political thinking, the management of the human body is often considered analogous to the governance of the state, and that analogy is what Liu had in mind when he urged the reader to 'understand the proper rhythm of tension and relaxation.' The analogy barely implied in Liu's work is made explicit some three hundred years later in the writings of Li Gang (1083–140), an important political figure of the Song dynasty and at one time the prime minister, who was born when Shen Kuo was already in his fifties. Li Gang developed metaphors of the

human body, the state, and the use of medicine in an interrelated framework for the discussion of political issues in his time. He argued that just as we take fine food to nurture our body, we also take poisonous drugs to attack diseases. ‘The kingly grace and moral influence are our fine food, and military forces and weapons are poisonous drugs,’ he says. ‘To reign over good subjects and assuage minor ailments, it is necessary to use civil governance as fine food, but to eliminate the unyielding and suppress the rebellious, it is necessary to use military forces as poisonous drugs. There is an appropriate time for both to be useful, and neither can be neglected.’[8] In another piece entitled quite straightforwardly ‘On Curing the State,’ Li Gang gives a metaphorical description of the state as a human body to be treated by doctors. ‘The ancients said that superior doctors cure the state, while secondary ones cure our diseases,’ he says:

> Although all under heaven is huge and numerous, it is just one human body. The royal house inside is the heart, offices outside reaching in four directions are the four limbs, and laws, rules, and penal codes are the veins and arteries. Doctors good in treating patients would not pay attention to whether they look fat or lean, but how their veins and arteries work. Superior doctors good in curing the state would not pay attention to whether that state is big or small, but how its laws, rules and penal codes work. When one has illness in the four limbs, potions and stones can be used to attack the disease, and a good doctor can deal with it. This can be considered an analogy to treating the state. When the state has illness in the four

> directions with barons and noble houses growing too powerful, or marshals and generals at the outposts too arrogant, a doctor good at curing the state can also deal with it.[9]

This is a typical Confucian statesman's allegorization of political governance, but the analogy between the human body and the state, as well as the relationship of both with the art of curing, certainly call to our mind the familiar notion of correspondences between the macrocosm and microcosm, and the metaphor of the body politic in the Western tradition from the medieval through the Renaissance to even modern times.[10] Indeed, the Western idea of the body politic can be traced as far back as Plato, who 'compared a well-governed state to the human body in its relation to the pleasure and pain of its parts.'[11] John of Salisbury (ca. 1120–80), the great twelfth-century political philosopher, who was about ninety years younger than Shen Kuo and forty years younger than Li Gang, paraphrases Plutarch's *The Instruction of Trajan* and writes that the king is 'the head in the republic,' and the senate its heart, that 'judges and governors of provinces' perform 'duties of the ears, eyes and mouth,' and officials and soldiers are the hands, while those who assist the king are 'comparable to the flanks.' Then he compares those in charge of treasury and finance to the belly or stomach and emphasizes their susceptibility to corruption:

> Treasurers and record keepers (I speak not of those who supervise prisoners, but of the counts of the Exchequer)

> resemble the shape of the stomach and intestines; these, if they accumulate with great avidity and tenaciously preserve their accumulation, engender innumerable and incurable diseases so that their infection threatens the ruin of the whole body.[12]

Such a classic expression of the body politic in the West is remarkably similar to Li Gang's analogy between the state and the human body, and in this metaphorical understanding, social and political problems in the state are described as diseases and infections to be treated by medicine. Therefore, in both Chinese and Western traditions, formulated independently of one another, the human body and its diseases become common metaphors for the state and its corruption.

Diseases are not only external, but can also be self-induced, which is clearly spelt out in John of Salisbury's disparaging comment on the stomach or belly. That is also the moral of a famous fable about the quarrel of a man's belly with the other members of his body, a fable originating in Aesop, made popular by Marie de France in the Middle Ages, printed in Camden's *Remains* of 1605, and given a Shakespearean reformulation at the beginning of *Coriolanus* (1.1.96). 'There was a time when all the body's members / Rebell'd against the belly,' accusing it of doing nothing, of being 'idle and unactive,' but taking up all the food, or, as Shakespeare puts it, 'Still cupboarding the viand.' In effect, all the body's members are charging the belly with greed and accumulating wealth with avidity. The belly's answer not only argues for the concept of the distribution of labour, but also consolidates

the idea of social hierarchy, which is so essential for order and unity. 'I am the store-house and the shop / Of the whole body,' the belly declares with pride (1.1.133):

> I send it through the rivers of your blood,
> Even to the court, the heart, to th' seat o' th' brain,
> And, through the cranks and offices of man,
> The strongest nerves and small inferior veins
> From me receive that natural competency
> Whereby they live.

In the original fable, when hands and feet refuse to work to feed the belly, the whole body collapses. The body politic is thus understood as a unity of diverse parts, an organism that is weakened and becomes sick when its hierarchy is upset and undermined. Ulysses' famous speech on 'degree' in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* makes effective use of this idea and compelling images of illness and medicine. The sun is described as the king of planets, 'whose med'cinable eye / Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil' (1.3.91). 'O when degree is shak'd,' says Ulysses, still continuing the medical analogy, 'The enterprise is sick' (1.3.101). To cure the body politic of its disease, both medicine and poison are useful. In Arcite's prayer to Mars in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, which is a scene generally accepted as written by Shakespeare, Arcite addresses the war god as a doctor who cures by violent means (5.1.62):

> O great corrector of enormous times,
> Shaker of o'er-rank states, thou grand decider

Of dusty and old titles, that heal'st with blood
The earth when it is sick, and cur'st the world
O' th' plurisy of people!

Military forces and weapons, as the Chinese statesman Li Gang argued, are 'poisonous drugs' to cure a sick state. For the Western body politic, treatment of its diseases is also a violent one. In Arcite's invocation to Mars, war is compared to blood-letting, the medical treatment for many diseases at the time, in which bleeding becomes the very means of healing. This is also what Alcibiades means at the end of *Timon of Athens*, when he marches his army into the corrupt city and makes the announcement:

And I will use the olive with my sword:
Make war breed peace, make peace stint war, make each
Prescribe to other as each other's leech. (5.4.82)

Here again the medical language and imagery are used metaphorically: war and peace are 'prescribed' as each other's blood-letting physician. Again the lethal and the therapeutic, poison and medicine, killing and curing, become closely linked as two approaches of the same governance, either of the state or of the human body.

In this context it is rather interesting to note that the very definition of a medical doctor in the ancient Confucian classic *The Rites of Zhou* already contains such opposite ideas in one concept: 'The doctor is in charge of matters related to medicine; he gathers poisons together to serve medical purposes.' The important second-century commentator Zheng Xuan (127–200) makes the con-

nection between medicine and poison explicit when he explains that 'medicinal substances are mostly poisonous.'[13] In a sense this ancient Chinese definition already contains the basic principle of modern medical science, which, as Michael Roberts explains, understands therapeutics 'as a form of controlled poisoning in which the therapeutic agents have implicit toxicity that should not be overlooked.'[14] From that perspective, then, we can well understand the changing nature of cinnabar in Shen Kuo's anecdote and the toxic effect of the overdose of drugs in Liu Yuxi's story. Again, as Roberts observes, modern therapeutics is accepted 'along the lines of William Witherings's 1789 dictum: *Poisons in small doses are the best medicines; and useful medicines in too large doses are poisonous*.' Roberts also reiterates 'the teaching of Paracelsus that *all things are poison, and nothing is without poison; the Dosis alone makes a thing not poison*.'[15] These very different texts all speak of the same principle and thus reveal some remarkable affinities between the Chinese and the Western traditions in understanding the nature of therapeutics, and in recognizing the paradox, the ambivalence or the dialectic, of medicine and poison.

The officially recognized emblem of the medical profession in the West, the caduceus, a staff entwined with two snakes, also suggests the close relationship between the poisonous and the therapeutic. It is a wand held by Hermes, or Mercury, a magic wand that, as Virgil describes it,

> summons
> Pale ghosts from Hell, or sends them there, denying
> Or giving sleep, unsealing dead men's eyes.[16]

The meaning of the two snakes has been interpreted in various ways, but clearly the deadly snakes are here associated with the power of healing. Holding the caduceus, Hermes conducts souls of the dead to the underworld, but he can also resurrect the dead ('unsealing dead men's eyes') and bring them back to the living – which again points to the duality of life and death, the lethal and the therapeutic. Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, is also represented as carrying a wooden staff with a snake wrapped around it. In a curious work from Tang China, we read about a strange 'blue snake from the area of Chen Jia Dong in Wuzhou; its head is extremely poisonous, but its tail can serve as an antidote. Southerners use the snake's head to make poison, which is known as the blue drug and can kill a man instantly by poison. They also take the snake's tail to make wax, which is an antitoxic drug.'[17] The observation is hardly accurate from a scientific point of view, but the idea that a snake can produce both poison and its antidote is certainly confirmed by modern scientific research. André Ménez, a specialist of snake proteins, argues that snake venoms may prove to be 'the source of a number of drugs which act effectively against various diseases.'[18] Interestingly, Ménez borrows an ancient Chinese idea to explain the principle of his medical research when he says: 'Yin and yang: this dualistic Chinese theory fits toxins perfectly. At first sight, a toxin is perceived for its dangerous character. Yet venoms and their components offer a potential gold mine from which new drugs can be developed.'[19]

The inherent duality of the therapeutic and the toxic is also ably expressed by the Greek word *pharmakon*, which

means both medicine and poison. Perhaps many of us are familiar with Derrida's exploration of the duality of that Greek word in his critique of what he calls 'Plato's Pharmacy,' his deconstructive reading of Plato's dialogues. 'The word *pharmakon* is caught in a chain of significations,' says Derrida.[20] 'This *pharmakon*, the "medicine," this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduced itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence.'[21] Derrida is interested in this basic and inherent ambivalence because it helps undo any signification quite beyond the intention and control of Plato as author. So when the word *pharmakon* is translated as 'remedy,' even though quite legitimately in the context of a particular locution, that translation, Derrida insists, destroys what he calls 'Plato's anagrammatic writing' by obliterating 'the virtual, dynamic references to the other uses of the same word in Greek.' What Derrida wants to emphasize is the inherent ambivalence of language itself in Plato's text, the fact that 'the word *pharmakon*, even while it means *remedy*, cites, re-cites, and makes legible that which *in the same word* signifies, in another spot and on a different level of the stage, *poison*.'[22] Derrida offers a typically long and deconstructive close reading that tries to destabilize the Platonic distinction of opposites, the containment of the two contrary senses of the same word. Plato is opposed to the 'transmutation of the drug into a remedy, of the poison into a counterpoison,' says Derrida, but 'prior to any distinction-making,' the word *pharmakon* already contains that fundamental ambivalence. 'The "essence" of the *pharmakon*,' says Derrida conclusively, 'lies in the way in which, having no stable essence, no "proper" characteris-

tics, it is not, in any sense (metaphysical, physical, chemical, alchemical) of the word, a *substance*.'[23]

That the medical substance does not have a fixed, unchanging essence is of course the point made all along by both the Chinese and Western texts we have discussed above, even though those texts do not speak the difficult language of heavy theorizing. Derrida aims to destabilize any substance, but for the other writers we have discussed above, it is precisely the temporarily stable effect of a substance that brings about either the therapeutic or the toxic effect. In the actual use of language or a real situation in life, one often has to make distinctions among the contradictory meanings of a word like *pharmakon*, and the irrevocable decision and its consequences are precisely what constitute the tragic (or the comic) in life as they do in art.

The lesson or insight we have learned from Chinese and Western metaphorical conceptualizations of the human body, medicine and poison, and the art of curing, can all be very helpful in preparing us for reading Shakespeare from a cross-cultural perspective, particularly for reading *Romeo and Juliet*, in which, I would argue, the idea of the body politic and the dialectic of medicine and poison are key issues and major themes that make up the very action and movement of the play. At the centre of the tragic action is the quick sequence of a number of events: the banishment of Romeo, Friar Laurence's potion to simulate Juliet's death, the fatal miscarriage of the Friar's letter to Romeo, and finally the tragic ending in which Romeo drinks the poison and Juliet kills herself with a dagger. Potion and poison, the Friar and

the Apothecary, love and hate, everywhere we find two opposite forces that set this tragic play in motion. The background of the tragedy is the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets, which, like a disease in the city of Verona, is finally cured by the sacrifice of the two lovers. Thus, the love of Romeo and Juliet is not just a private, personal matter of two young lovers, but the means to cure a sick state or community, the medicine to stop the bleeding of Verona. That is exactly how Friar Laurence sees it when he agrees to marry Romeo and Juliet in secret, declaring that '[i]n one respect I'll thy assistant be. / For this alliance may so happy prove / To turn your households' rancour to pure love' (2.3.86). It does, but not in the way the Friar intended. The love between Romeo and Juliet is not just tragic, but also redemptive; and it would not be tragic if it were merely the love between two young people without the significant social value of redemption and reconciliation. Their love thus functions as a remedy for their households' rancor, and though it proves deadly for the lovers themselves, it eventually turns out to be therapeutic for the city of Verona. The public significance of their love and sacrifice is acknowledged at the end of the play, where it is promised that statues of the two lovers will be raised 'in pure gold,' symbolizing union and reconciliation, the restoration of peace and order in the city.

Now let us look more closely at textual details. When the play begins, we are told by the Chorus in the Prologue that the tragedy unfolds '[i]n fair Verona, where we lay our scene ... Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.' The feuding families of the Montagues and the Capulets

are figuratively making Verona bleed, and thus the idea of the body politic provides the general background for the action of the play. The repetition of the word 'civil' is remarkably ironic here, for the feud that sheds Verona's 'civil blood' is anything but civil. As Jill Levenson comments, 'In this case the repeated term helps to define contradictions in Verona; it produces an antithesis of concepts, a kind of synoeciosis or oxymoron.'[24] Of course, contradictions and antitheses are exactly what we see in the paradoxical relationship between medicine and poison. The mention of Verona or the specific Italian setting is also significant, because in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, owing to long-standing hostilities towards the Roman Catholic Church and also misunderstanding of Machiavelli's writings, Italy, in popular imagination as well as in theatrical conventions, became closely related to poison and intrigue. 'For poysons the Italians skill in making and putting them to vse hath beene long since tryed, to the perishing of kings and Emperours by those deadly potions giuen to them in the very Chalice mingled with the very precious blood of our Redeemer,' says Fynes Moryson, a sixteenth-century writer contemporary with Shakespeare. 'In our tyme, it seemes the Art of Poysoning is reputed in Italy worthy of Princes practice.'[25] That seems to depict Verona in *Romeo and Juliet*, a dark place against which the image of light, particularly as represented by Juliet, becomes strikingly prominent. And yet, even Juliet has a brief moment of doubt before taking the potion Friar Laurence has prepared for her, wondering, 'What if it be a poison which the Friar / Subtly hath minister'd to have me dead?' (4.3.24). Of course,

she quickly comes to trust the Friar rather than betraying her marriage to Romeo by entering a second and forced marriage. The Friar's potion, however, fails to help her escape from her dilemma and, quite unexpectedly, becomes instrumental in bringing about the tragic death of the two lovers. Ultimately, therefore, the potion the Friar intended to work as a remedy proves to be no different from the poison that kills Romeo in the end.

We may recall that the Chinese definition of a doctor is someone who uses poisons to attack diseases. That is exactly how John Webster describes medical doctors in his well-known tragedy of intrigue and revenge, *The White Devil*: 'Physicians, that cure poisons, still work / With counterpoisons' (3.3.64–5). As Mariangela Tempera remarks, 'with these words Flamineo aptly brings the doctor's trade into the same shadowy aura as the poisoner's.'[26] In *Romeo and Juliet*, the ambivalence of doctor and poisoner is an important theme that is reinforced by Romeo when he buys the deadly poison at a shabby pharmacy in Mantua and tells the Apothecary:

> There is thy gold – worse poison to men's souls,
> Doing more murder in this loathsome world
> Than these poor compounds that thou mayst not sell.
> I sell thee poison, thou hast sold me none. (5.1.80)

With these words, Romeo reverses the roles of gold and poison, the one who sells the poison and the customer who pays for it.

This is just one of the numerous examples of Romeo's oxymoronic speech, filled with contradictions and rever-

sals. Early in the play, even before Romeo first appears on stage, old Montague already describes his son's lovesickness as a disease: 'Black and portentous must this humour prove / Unless good counsel may the cause remove' (1.1.139). Romeo's first speech is a typical example of rhetorical contradictions and antitheses, oxymoron bordering on the extreme:

> Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate,
> O anything of nothing first create!
> O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
> Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms!
> Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,
> Still-waking sleep that is not what it is!
> This love feel I that feel no love in this. (1.1.174)

'Here is the very home of contraries,' as Frank Kermode comments.[27] Therefore, we should not perhaps dismiss such studied rhetorical utterances as simply Romeo's youthful infatuation with love that lacks the depth of true emotions, even though such exaggerated oxymoron articulates his confused lovesickness before he meets Juliet, when he thought he was in love with Rosaline. Romeo's language does move later into a higher, more lyrical register. Kermode points out a further and remarkable change when Romeo is in exile in Mantua, before buying poison from the Apothecary: 'Instead of elaborate love-conceits and the fantasies of melancholy he looks straight at the issue: "Thou knowest my lodging, get me ink and paper, / And hire post-horses; I will hence tonight," he says to his servant (5.1.25).'[28] But shortly

after this, as we have seen above, Romeo talks to the Apothecary and reverses the roles of selling the poison and making the purchase. Thus, in his speech contraries and the dialectic of opposites persist, even as his language becomes more direct and straightforward. The rhetoric or textual details change, but the major theme of the antithetical duality of love and death, medicine and poison, remains constant throughout the play, in which the opposite sides are not just antithetical, but dialectical or reversible. As Northrop Frye argues, 'It is through the language, and the imagery the language uses, that we understand how the *Liebestod* of Romeo and Juliet, their great love and their tragic death, are bound up together as two aspects of the same thing.'[29] In that sense, then, the potion the Friar prepares for Juliet and the poison Romeo purchases in Mantua are not antithetical, but likewise 'bound up together as two aspects of the same thing,' much like the therapeutic and the toxic effects of the same medicinal substance we have seen in the Chinese texts discussed earlier.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, it is Friar Laurence in a long soliloquy, when he first appears on the stage (2.3.1–26), who gives the clearest and the most elaborate articulation of the dialectic of opposites, the ambivalence of medicine and poison. Walking in his garden in the early morning to fill a basket with 'baleful weeds and precious-juiced flowers,' the Friar reflects on the paradoxical nature of all things, that the earth is both nature's tomb for burying all creatures and also nature's womb to give birth to all, that good and bad are bound up in everything in a delicate balance: 'Virtue itself turns vice being misapplied, / And vice

sometime's by action dignified' (2.3.17). His speech of course reiterates the old idea of dialectics in philosophical reflection since ancient times. Then the Friar continues:

> Within the infant rind of this weak flower
> Poison hath residence, and medicine power:
> For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part;
> Being tasted, stays all senses with the heart.
> Two such opposed kings encamp them still
> In man as well as herbs: grace and rude will;
> And where the worser is predominant
> Full soon the canker death eats up that plant. (2.3.19)

The 'weak flower' the Friar mentions here recalls the cinnabar in Shen Kuo's story and the drug in Liu Yuxi's autobiographical account, because they all share the dual nature of a substance, the antithetical effects of the therapeutic and the toxic, medicine and poison. These are not just antithetical qualities, but reversible ones as well, and interestingly it is the Chinese notion of the reciprocity of yin and yang that came to mind when Julian Glover of the Royal Shakespeare Company, who had played the role of Friar Laurence with great success, tried to understand the Friar's reflections on nature and its delicate balance of contrary powers. Speaking of Friar Laurence's character, Glover maintains that the Friar in that long soliloquy is wondering at 'the diversity of creation,' trying to illustrate 'the grand theme: yin and yang, the entirely opposite qualities inherent in everything so that balance is maintained, with a tiny example, that of both the poison and medicine contained in a single "infant"

flower.'[30] In a way, the entire tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet* is built on the basis of this 'grand theme,' the inherent opposite qualities and their reversal in all things, illustrated most strikingly by the reversal of medicine and poison. As I have argued earlier, the potion Friar Laurence prepares for Juliet and the miscarriage of his letter to Romeo are crucial to the tragic action, with disastrous consequences. The Friar's soliloquy in the garden thus takes on the ominous connotations of a tragic prophecy, the meaning of which cannot be known to the Friar himself at that moment and is quite beyond his own good intentions. Through the inexplicable intervention of unexpected turns of events, the Friar eventually becomes an ironic example of the very philosophy he preaches, that '[v]irtue itself turns vice being misapplied.'

And yet, the central theme of the duality of medicine and poison is not always fully appreciated by Shakespeare's readers, audiences, or critics. Joan Holmer argues that modern readers tend to dismiss too quickly Friar Laurence's long soliloquy as platitudinous, but in so doing they also overlook 'Shakespeare's originality in crafting this speech.'[31] Even Brian Gibbens, editor of the Arden edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, disparagingly refers to the Friar's mode of expression as 'formulaic and sententious, uncreatively dependent on the stereotypes of proverb lore.'[32] But compared with Shakespeare's direct source, Arthur Brooke's poem *Romeus and Juliet*, the image of the Friar is much more developed, and the philosophical view expressed in his soliloquy offers us the most important clue to the action and meaning of the tragedy. The tiny example of the 'weak flower,' as Julian

Glover realizes, illustrates the 'grand theme' of the reciprocity of yin and yang, the delicate balance between the effects of medicine and poison; and, more generally, it suggests the tragic structure of the reversal of fortune to misfortune, of good intention to catastrophic outcomes.

Reversal and recognition, as Aristotle points out, are 'the most important things with which a tragedy enthralls [us].'[33] In *Romeo and Juliet*, reversal not only marks a crucial moment in the action of the play, but is suggested and implied all along in the language, in the pervasive paradoxes and oxymorons, in haunting images of premonitions. When the Friar is about to join the hands of Romeo and Juliet in a 'holy act,' he warns them that '[t]hese violent delights have violent ends / And in their triumph die, like fire and powder, / Which as they kiss consume' (2.6.9). This sounds tragically prophetic, for the lovers indeed die, each echoing the word 'kiss' in the last speech. Romeo drinks to Juliet when he takes the poison: 'Here's to my love! O true apothecary, / Thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss I die' (5.3.119). This is echoed by Juliet when she tries to poison herself: 'I will kiss thy lips. / Haply some poison yet doth hang on them / To make me die with a restorative' (5.3.164). Of course, the reversal also befalls the wise and well-intended Friar in an ironic contrast between his teaching and his action. He has warned Romeo, 'Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast' (2.3.90). But in the end, he is the one who tries to run fast and stumbles: 'Saint Francis be my speed! How oft tonight / Have my old feet stumbled at graves' (5.3.121). From the overall structure of the tragedy down to small details of textual echoes, therefore, the duality of the

nature of things and the reversal of opposites are at the core of *Romeo and Juliet*, clearly illustrated in the Friar's reflections on the 'weak flower' and its potential for both poisonous and medicinal effects.

Despite his knowledge, sagacity, and philosophical wisdom, Friar Laurence cannot foresee the consequences of his plans and actions, and yet everyone depends on him in the end to explain how and why the tragedy happened. The story told by the Friar at the end is not a mere recounting of what the audience already knows, because, of all the characters in the play, the Friar is the only one at that point who truly knows what has happened. Again, he speaks in paradoxes:

> I am the greatest, able to do least,
> Yet most suspected, as the time and place
> Doth make against me, of this direful murder.
> And here I stand, both to impeach and purge
> Myself condemned and myself excus'd. (5.3.222)

That the Friar cannot foresee the consequences of his own plans and actions is in fact a condition of the tragedy, as it shows the inherently tragic limitations of humans, and the fact that he finally realizes such limitations is also crucial, for therein he articulates the other important element of a tragedy, namely, recognition. 'A recognition,' says Aristotle, 'as the word itself indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge.'[34] When Juliet wakes up in the tomb, the Friar urges her to leave 'that nest / Of death, contagion, and unnatural sleep,' for he has come to the realization that '[a] greater power than we can contra-

dict / Hath thwarted our intents' (5.3.151). These words, like the Prologue's 'star-cross'd lovers,' may not satisfy our modern mind in search of a rational explanation, and some critics have faulted the Friar or even Shakespeare for giving too much weight to chance or accident in trying to account for the unfolding of the tragedy. For the classic and Shakespearean notion of tragedy, however, 'a greater power than we can contradict' is precisely what precipitates the action into a reversal of fortune, the concatenation of events that actually follows its own logic 'in accordance with probability or necessity.'[35] Like Oedipus in Sophocles' great tragedy, whatever the tragic hero does to avoid misfortune pushes him precisely in that fatal direction, leading inevitably to the tragic ending. In spite of all good intentions, the result always lies beyond the protagonist's knowledge and control. Isn't this what the Friar himself suggested in his reflections on balance and reversals, on the reciprocity of good and evil, poison and medicine?

Of course, the love and death of the young lovers, the sheer beauty of the poetry, the intensity of the emotions expressed in striking images and metaphors, all these make *Romeo and Juliet* one of Shakespeare's most popular and beloved plays. What I am trying to argue, however, is that the reciprocity of opposites, particularly the ambivalence and dialectic of medicine and poison, constitute the overall central theme that makes the tragedy what it is, and that Friar Laurence is the one who gives the most memorable articulation to this central theme. As the two young lovers turn to the Friar for counsel and advice, what he does has a decisive influence on the action and

development of the play. Without the Friar's blessing Romeo and Juliet would not have been married, and without his potion Juliet would not have escaped from the second forced marriage; but neither would the tragedy have happened the way it did. From the dramatic point of view, then, the Friar stands at the centre of action and plays a far more important role than he is often granted.

Again, it is from the perspective of reading across cultures that we may have a better appreciation of this central theme of the reciprocity of opposites, because when we read *Romeo and Juliet* along with those very different Chinese texts by Shen Kuo, Liu Yuxi, and Li Gang, we may start to see the importance of the dialectic of poison and medicine, and understand most clearly the reciprocity of yin and yang, the reversal of opposite qualities residing in the same substance. Let us recall one more time Shen Kuo's reflections on the changing nature of cinnabar that can either kill or cure: '[I]f it can turn into a deadly poison, it can also change to do great good,' he says; 'if it can change to kill, it is only reasonable to expect that it can also give life.' The prominent idea here is of course the duality – therapeutic and toxic – of the medicinal substance. We may then put Shen Kuo's words side by side with Friar Laurence's reflections on the balance of contrary powers in man and nature, the dialectic of opposites:

> Within the infant rind of this weak flower
> Poison hath residence, and medicine power:
> For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part;

> Being tasted, stays all senses with the heart.
> Two such opposed kings encamp them still
> In man as well as herbs: grace and rude will.

Such textual encounters clearly demonstrate the unexpected affinities of ideas and expressions in very different literary and cultural traditions. To understand different texts in depth requires situating them in their own specific contexts and circumstances, but beyond their differences thematic patterns will emerge to put them in perspective and reveal the surprising similarities in the workings of the human mind, the affinities in imagination and human creativity. Represented by the ambivalence of medicine and poison, the dialectic of opposite qualities is perhaps one of the most basic patterns of movement in nature as well as the human world: the tendency of things moving towards a reversal that may also be a return.

NOTES

1 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 267.
2 Shen Kuo, *Xin jiaozheng Mengxi bi tan* [*New Edition of the Conversations with a Writing Brush at Dream Brook*], ed. Hu Daojing (Hong Kong: Zhonghua, 1975), 19.
3 Ibid., 238.
4 Ibid., 244.
5 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), 199.
6 Ibid., 200n.
7 Liu Yuxi, 'Lesson Learned from Medicine,' in *Liu Yuxi ji* [*Liu*

Yuxi's Works], ed. Bian Xiaoxuan, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1990), 1: 77.

8 Li Gang, 'To Rule over the State Is Like Treating a Patient,' in *Liangxi ji* [*Li Gang's Collected Writings*], *juan* 150, in *Siku quanshu* [*Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1987 reprint), vol. 1126, 648a.

9 Li Gang, 'On Curing the State,' *juan* 157, ibid., 683b–4a.

10 In commenting on the analogy between the human body and the body politic, Angus Fletcher remarks that in Albert Camus's modern allegory *The Plague*, 'the analogy is drawn between a plague of rats carrying bubonic infection and the plague of an invading military occupation (the Nazi occupation of Oran) and its accompanying political diseases' (*Allegory*, 71). For the idea of correspondences with special reference to English literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, E.M.W. Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Macmillan, 1944) is still helpful.

11 Plato, *Republic* 5.464b, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, including Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 703.

12 John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*, 5:2, in *Medieval Political Theory – A Reader: The Quest for the Body Politic, 1100–1400*, ed. Cary J. Nederman and Kate Langdon Forhan, (London: Routledge, 1993), 38–9.

13 *Zhou li zhushu* [*The Rites of Zhou with Annotations*], in Ruan Yuan (1764–1849), ed., *Shisan jing zhushu* [*The Thirteen Classics with Annotations*], 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1980), 1: 666.

14 Michael B. Roberts, *Nothing Is Without Poison: Understanding Drugs* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2002), 8.

15 Ibid., 13.

16 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 4.242–4, trans. Rolfe Humphries (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 95.

17 Duan Chengshi (?–863), *Youyang zazu* [*Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*] (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1981), 170.

18 André Ménez, *The Subtle Beast: Snakes, from Myth to Medicine* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003), 17.

19 Ibid., 139. More recently, the *New York Times* reported that Dr Bryan

Fry, a biologist from the University of Melbourne, considered snake poison of great value in medicine. 'If you kill off the snakes,' he said, 'you could be killing the next wonder drug' (Carl Zimmer, 'Open Wide: Decoding the Secrets of Venom,' *New York Times*, 5 April 2005, F1).

20 Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy,' in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 95.

21 Ibid., 70.

22 Ibid., 98.

23 Ibid., 125–6. While Derrida's discussion of *pharmakon* exposes the duality of this Greek word and concept, that insight is not developed in his essay on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for his discussion of that play concentrates on the problem of naming as the problem of aphorism. See Jacques Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime,' in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 414–33.

24 Jill L. Levenson, 'Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: The Places of Invention,' *Shakespeare Survey* 49, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 51.

25 Fynes Moryson, *Shakespeare's Europe*, ed. Charles Hughes (London: Benjamin Blom, 1903), 406; quoted in Mariangela Tempera, 'The Rhetoric of Poison in John Webster's Italianate Plays,' in *Shakespeare's Italy: Functions of Italian Locations in Renaissance Drama*, ed. M. Marrapodi, A.J. Hoenselaars, M. Cappuzzo, and L.F. Santucci (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 231.

26 Tempera, 'The Rhetoric of Poison in John Webster's Italianate Plays,' 237.

27 Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 54.

28 Ibid., 58.

29 Northrop Frye, 'Romeo and Juliet,' in *Modern Critical Interpretations: Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2000), 161.

30 Julian Glover, 'Friar Lawrence in *Romeo and Juliet*,' in *Players of Shakespeare 4: Further Essays in Shakespearian Performance by Players*

with the Royal Shakespeare Company, ed. Robert Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 167.

31 Joan Ozark Holmer, 'The Poetics of Paradox: Shakespeare's versus Zeffirelli's Cultures of Violence,' *Shakespeare Survey* 49, 165.

32 Brian Gibbons, Intro. to the Arden edition of *Romeo and Juliet* (London: Methuen, 1980), 66.

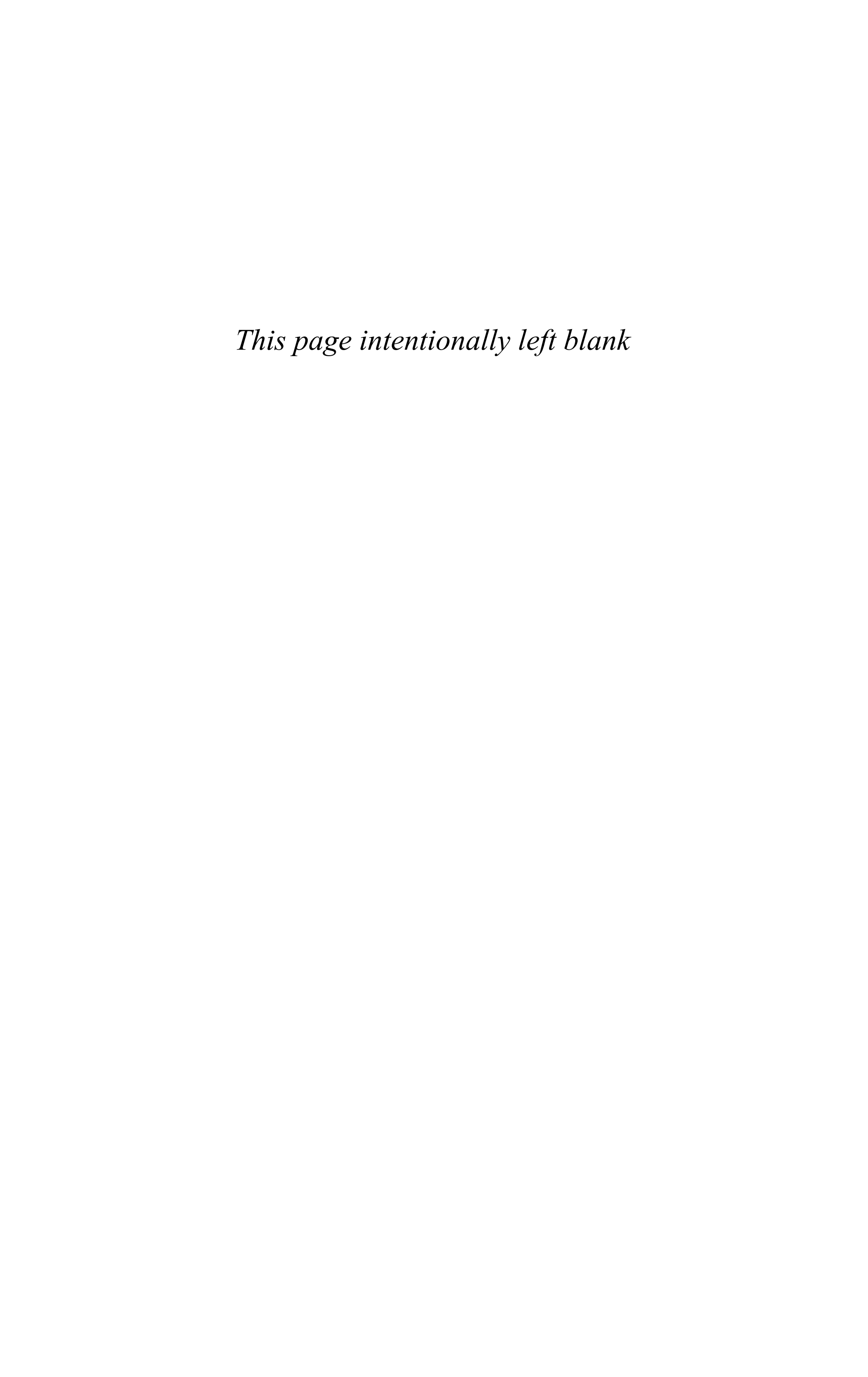
33 Aristotle, *Poetics* 50a, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 9.

34 Ibid., 52b, 14.

35 Ibid., 52a, 14.

CHAPTER FOUR

'A paradise within thee, happier far': The Dialectic of Return and Reversal



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At the end of the last chapter I mentioned the dialectic of opposite qualities as a basic pattern of movement, a movement in the shape of a reversal that may also be a return. In this chapter I shall further explore this theme and see how it manifests itself in texts of both East and West. To begin with a literary example, I will quote a poem by Emily Dickinson, in which the poet describes the movement of 'a single bird' gradually filling up the sky with her 'cautious melody,' until the bird and the sky become one, until –

> Element
> Nor implement was seen,
> And place was where the presence was,
> Circumference between.

These lines portraying the invisibility of the bird seem to resonate with Shelley's poem 'To a Skylark,' where Shelley describes the skylark fading into the evening sky:

> The pale purple even
> Melts around thy flight;
> Like a star of heaven
> In the broad daylight,
> Thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight.

Shelley also says of the skylark, 'from thy presence showers a rain of melody,' but otherwise the two poems are quite different. While Shelley calls for a 'blithe Spirit' to cheer up the poet and teach him 'harmonious madness' and the joy of singing, Dickinson's bird seems to be an

extension of the poet's own spirit, and the movement of the bird's flight symbolically intimates her own spiritual quest. 'Inevitably, the poet could objectify her emotions only by embodying them in sensory images and metaphors,' says Albert Gelpi with reference to Dickinson's poetry. 'And so consciousness defined the inner world in terms of the outer and the outer world in terms of the inner, its arc sweeping variously around the central self.'[1] That is to say, the poet's spirit or consciousness moves between the inner and the outer world, and 'circumference,' a favourite word with Dickinson, describes a circular movement of the spirit, an imaginary arc surrounding the central self. Circumference, as Gelpi further notes, is Dickinson's 'most frequent metaphor for ecstasy,' 'a symbol for the spirit in activity.'[2] What I am suggesting is that this poem describes Dickinson's own spirit in activity, punctuated by different moments in time ('at half-past three,' 'at half-past four,' and 'at half-past seven'). The poet's spirit travels to the height of the universe in imagination without herself ever physically moving at all, for the poet's consciousness is anchored in her own place, here and now. That is what I take the enigmatic last line to mean: 'Circumference between,' that is, between her conscious self and the height attained by her own spirit, symbolized by the unseen bird. The movement described here, in other words, is an imaginary one, a movement of the mind or the spirit rather than the physical movement of the body.

Emily Dickinson lived all her life like a hermit within the limits of her family home in Amherst, Massachusetts, and yet her poetry testifies to the power of her spirit that

flies high and aspires to the infinite and the eternal, beyond the outer limits of an enormous circumference. In sharp contrast to the banality or immobility of her life, the extraordinary creative power of her intelligence and imagination is engaged in a tireless inquiry into the meaning of the life of consciousness, what she famously called her 'business of Circumference.' Of course, in reading great poets, as Harold Bloom acknowledges, 'we are confronted by authentic intellectual difficulties'; and in reading Emily Dickinson in particular, we encounter 'the most authentic cognitive difficulties.'[3] I would not therefore presume to have neutralized all those difficulties and know exactly what Emily Dickinson meant to say in this particular poem, but it seems to me reasonable to entertain the idea that the poet is here describing a spiritual journey in the shape of a perfect circle, a circumference that encompasses all movement, but movement of the mind rather than the body, a movement that produces endless returns and reversals. Such a reading would make it possible to relate Dickinson's poem to the other texts I shall discuss in this chapter, which is, as I have already indicated, concerned with representations of the imaginary movement of the mind as a spiritual quest in the shape of a circle.

In the context of nineteenth-century American literature, the theme of the self and its spiritual quest seems to strike a particular chord with major writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Dickinson. The image of circumference or the circle is essential. 'The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second,' says Emerson in a well-known essay entitled 'Circles.' The cir-

cle or circular movement is thus 'the primary figure,' 'the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St. Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere. We are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of this first of forms.'[4] In such a view, the circle becomes the primary figure that suggests to us all the copious meanings to be deciphered not only in nature and the world, but in the relationship between human life and the external environment. Emerson continues: 'The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end.'[5] As Lawrence Buell comments, 'More than any other Emerson essay, "Circles" articulates the idea of creative energy constantly outdoing itself,' that is, a constant spiritual quest to go beyond the limitations of the self.[6] This concentration on the self, this *self*-reliance, constitutes the spirit of what Harold Bloom calls the 'American religion,' of which Emerson is the prophet and seer. 'The mind of Emerson is the mind of America,' says Bloom, 'and the central concern of that mind was the American religion, which most memorably was named "self-reliance."'[7] In this view, then, self and self-reliance become uniquely American.

If we understand self-reliance and the images of the circle and circumference in the specific context of Emerson, Dickinson, and the other nineteenth-century American poets, writers, and religious thinkers, that particular trait of self-reliance may indeed appear to be specifically American. I am not, however, interested in such American particularism, because the self-reliance or spiritual

quest of the individual is by no means a uniquely American theme in literature or philosophy. To open up that theme, we just need to look at the reference to St Augustine in that crucial passage quoted above from Emerson's essay, and put that reference in perspective. St Augustine is neither the first nor the last to articulate the idea that God or divine perfection is 'a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere.' In the fifteenth century, Nicolas of Cusa argued that human knowledge is all relative and limited, and that to realize this limitation is to acquire what he called 'learned ignorance' (*docta ignorantia*). He explains that each man observes things from his own position and assumes that 'he is in the *quasi*-motionless center,' and 'will certainly determine the poles [of this motion] in relation to himself.' As each person has a different position and assumes a different centre, 'the fabric of the world (*machina mundi*) will *quasi* have its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere, because the circumference and the center are God, who is everywhere and nowhere.'[8] In tracing the source of this remark, Alexandre Koyré comments that '[t]his famous saying which describes God as a *sphaera cuius centrum ubique, circumferentia nullibi* appears for the first time in this form in the pseudo-Hermetic *Book of the XXIV Philosophers*, an anonymous compilation of the XIIth century.'[9]

Since the twelfth century, then, this has become a familiar and popular saying, almost like a proverb, widely and freely used without its specific provenance having to be identified. Sir Thomas Browne wrote in the seventeenth century, '*Trismegistus* his Circle, whose center is every

where, and circumference no where, was no Hyperbole.'[10] Speaking of the infinitude of nature, Blaise Pascal used exactly the same language when he remarks that nature is 'une sphère infinie dont le centre est partout, et la circonférence nulle part' (Nature is an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere).[11] But the idea that nature or the universe is a perfect sphere can be traced back to Plato and even to the pre-Socratic philosophers. The Demiurge 'made the universe a circle moving in a circle,' says Plato.[12] He maintains that 'the universe is in the form of a sphere,' that its centre equidistant from all that is not the centre. 'For the center of the world cannot be rightly called either above or below, but is the center and nothing else,' says Plato, 'and the circumference is not the center, and has in no one part of itself a different relation to the center from what it has in any of the opposite parts.'[13] If for Plato the centre is neither above nor below, neither here nor there, and every point on the circumference has the same relation to the centre, then we may say that the centre is everywhere, and circumference nowhere.

The images of perfect spheres, centres, and circles have often appeared in the works of poets. Henry Vaughan's 'The World,' for example, is thoroughly Platonic in spirit as well as in imagery:

I saw Eternity the other night
Like a great *Ring* of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright,
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years
Driv'n by the spheres

Like a vast shadow mov'd, In which the world
And all her train were hurl'd.

In a poem to the Countess of Bedford, John Donne wrote that one cannot separate discretion or wit from religion, because they are all one in the perfect form of circles or spheres:

In those poor types of God (round circles) so
Religion's types the pieceless centers flow,
And are in all the lines which all ways go.

In commenting on these lines, Herbert Grierson says: 'The use of the circle as an emblem of infinity is very old'; and he credited St Bonaventura with describing God as 'a circle whose centre is everywhere, whose circumference nowhere.'[14] Thus, different sources are given for this famous saying, which only testifies to the popularity and wide dissemination of the idea.

But we can trace the idea of cosmic circles even further back to the pre-Socratics. Empedocles has been credited with originating this expression, and he certainly conceived of the four basic elements or roots of the world – earth, air, fire, and water – as constantly moving in a cycle:

For at one time [they] grew to be one alone
from many, and at another, again, [they] grew apart to be
many from one.

The movement of the world is thus a constant reversal of one to many and many to one, from unity by force of

love to separation by force of strife and back again. In this constant reversal, says Empedocles, the elements are 'always unchanged in a cycle.'[15] Similarly, in the cyclical movement of the four seasons, in the cycle of life and death and the transformation of the soul, Pythagoras saw the constancy of all things. As Ovid describes him in *Metamorphoses*, Pythagoras believed that

> What we call birth
> Is the beginning of a difference,
> No more than that, and death is only ceasing
> Of what had been before. The parts may vary,
> Shifting from here to there, hither and yon,
> And back again, but the great sum is constant.[16]

Thus, from pre-Socratics like Pythagoras and Empedocles to Plato, then to St Augustine, Nicolas of Cusa, Thomas Browne, and Pascal, to the metaphysical poets, and to Emerson and Emily Dickinson, philosophical thinking and the poetic imagination have often tried to locate the self in the universe and to understand the spirit as constantly moving within the infinitely large circumference of a cosmic circle.

But from a cross-cultural point of view, how does this theme manifest itself in different traditions? Is the circle or sphere also considered an emblem of perfection in the East? In a pioneer study of the conceptual metaphor of the circle or sphere, Qian Zhongshu mentions many of the examples quoted above and brings them to a fruitful comparison with similar articulations in the Chinese tradition. Qian writes:

> In speaking of the marvellous perfection of the entity of *tao*, our ancient thinkers and philosophers also made use of the images of circles or spheres. *The Book of Changes* has it that 'the virtue of yarrow stalks [for divination] is round and divine.' In the introduction to his *Explication of the Confucian Analects*, Huang Kan says that the *Analects* (*lun yu*) is so named because 'the ethical (*lun*) is the same [in sound] as a wheel (*lun*). That implies that the teachings of this book are perfect and complete, endlessly turning around like the wheel of a chariot.' He further remarks that 'Lord Cai describes the perfection and completeness of this book metaphorically, saying that there are things that are huge but not encompassing, and there are things that are tiny but reaching out to all. For example, a hundred-foot big mirror will necessarily distort certain objects, while a small bright pearl much less than an inch in diameter may contain the entire universe in its reflection. The *Analects* is small but round and all-reaching, just like a small bright pearl.' ... Chen Xiyi and Zhou Yuan-gong symbolically conceptualize the *tao* with the image of a round circle in their *Diagram of the Great Ultimate*. In his *Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate*, Zhu Xi says that 'the circle has no extreme end and is therefore the great ultimate.'[17]

We may recall that at the beginning of the second chapter I mentioned the idea of the circle in Plato and the image of a wheel in Zhuangzi. The image of pearl was also discussed there. In Buddhist iconography as well, the circle or wheel is a potent symbol. Interestingly, in a comparative study of Christian and Buddhist images, Robert

Elinor cites the same reference to God as 'the intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere,' but this time these words are attributed to Alan of Lille (*Maxims of Theology*, 7).[18] He then compares this image of the circle with the Eastern mandala and the characteristic Buddhist emblem, the 'Wheel of Dharma,' and explains the significance of that sacred wheel in Buddha's teaching gesture (the *dharmacakra*) – 'his fingers form the circles of the turning wheel.'[19] Huang Kan, as we have just seen, used the image of a turning wheel as a symbol of perfection to praise the Confucian teaching in the *Analects*.

In Dante's great epic *The Divine Comedy*, when he describes what he saw at the very end of his long journey, when he had reached the Empyrean at the height of Heaven, the image of Light again significantly appears in the shape of three circles:

Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza
de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri
di tre colori e d'una contenenza.

In that high light's deep and bright substance
three circles appear before me
of three colours, but of one dimension.

(*Paradiso*, 33.115)

The human mind fails to grasp the full meaning of these circles, and yet, says the poet:

ma già volgeva il mio disire e il velle

sì come rota che igualmente è mossa
l'amor che move il Sole e l'altre stelle.

but already my desire and will were moved
like a wheel revolving perfectly by
the Love that moves the sun and the other stars. (33.143)

With that image of a revolving wheel, as Teodolinda Barolini comments, Dante articulates a firm belief that 'he was inspired by God with a true vision.'[20] Thus, the image of a round shape – a wheel, a circle or sphere – is widely used in both the East and the West to symbolize perfection and completeness, and philosophers, religious thinkers, and poets in the East use such images in much the same way as Plato and other Western philosophers and poets did. We may recall that the image of the pearl discussed in the second chapter is used as a symbol for poetry. In fact, in classical Chinese tradition, many poets and critics use that image to describe the perfection of a literary work in both idea and execution, the ultimate perfection being as complete in itself as a circle or sphere.[21]

Like Empedocles, the Taoist philosopher Laozi conceived of the world as constantly moving in a cycle. 'All the teeming creatures will each return to its roots,' says Laozi. 'Returning to one's roots is called stillness, and that is what is meant by returning to one's destiny.'[22] We have seen in Emily Dickinson's poem that the spirit moves in a circle, 'its arc sweeping variously around the central self.' We have learned from Emerson that the circle is 'the primary figure,' and that life is 'a self-evolving circle.' Laozi's understanding of the circular movement

of the self centres on the idea of stillness (*jing*), or what he calls 'non-action' (*wu wei*), for he famously said: 'The *tao* does nothing and yet there is nothing it cannot do' (chap. 37). For Laozi, however, non-action is not the same as mere passivity; rather, it means to follow the tendency of things in their natural course of action. In the stillness of non-action, the Taoist sage is able to know everything and do everything. Thus Laozi declares,

> Without stepping out of the door, one can know all the things under heaven.
> Without looking out of the window, one can see the way of heaven.
> The further one goes, the less one knows.
> Therefore the sage knows without stepping out, names things without looking, and accomplishes everything without doing anything. (chap. 47)

In a way, such an emphasis on stillness reminds us of Emily Dickinson's poem, which, as I argued, represents the flight of the spirit without physical movement of the body. In a typically paradoxical manner, Laozi claims that stillness and immobility are the way to knowledge, while mobility is not. This is of course counter-intuitive, because we normally assume that learning is a gradual progression in which the further one goes, the more one knows. Laozi claims just the opposite, but that is not surprising, for anyone familiar with the *Laozi* text will know that paradox is indeed his favourite way of speaking. His ideas, his Taoist philosophy, are typically couched in the language of reversals and subversion of our usual as-

sumptions. As Laozi puts it himself: 'Positive words appear to be negative' (chap. 78). The interaction of opposites forms a dialectical way of contemplation. In his formulation of ideas, he often employs such a dialectic movement of opposites, and stylistically makes antitheses and antimetaboles a hallmark of his writing.

For example, he claims that '[t]he one who knows does not speak; the one who speaks does not know' (chap. 56). 'On disaster good fortune reclines, and underneath good fortune disaster lies in ambush' (chap. 58). And again: 'Trustworthy words are not embellished; embellished words are not trustworthy. The good one does not argue; the one who argues is not good' (chap. 81). All these statements are intriguing paradoxes expressed in the form of parallelism, with the second part reinforcing the first in a reverse order. Laozi conceives of the great *tao* as 'mysterious femininity' (chap. 6), and his idea of a Taoist sage is also paradoxical because, contrary to normal expectations, he describes the sage as someone weak and ignorant, 'like an infant that has not yet learnt how to smile,' someone who is 'drowsy,' 'muddled,' with 'the mind of a fool' (chap. 20). All these of course speak of the potential force of stillness; all that seem weak and ignorant will turn out to be strong and wise in a typical dialectical reversal. Thus, we learn from Laozi that the weak will subdue the strong, that '[t]he most yielding under heaven can ride over the toughest' (chap. 43). Given such dialectical reversals, then, how should we understand Laozi's claim that stillness generates knowledge, while mobility or action does not? How do we understand his claim that '[t]he further one goes, the less one knows'?

Here, as Qian Zhongshu points out in his commentary, Laozi is not talking about knowledge in the usual sense, as something one can learn from books or by experience.[23] In fact, Laozi considers such knowledge harmful to the pursuit of the heavenly *tao*, for he believes that 'when with regard to learning one gains every day, with regard to *tao* one loses every day' (chap. 48). Acquired knowledge about the external world becomes an impediment to the full realization of *tao* internally. The knowledge Laozi talks about here is just such an internal realization, the true knowledge of *tao*, which is not to be gained through reading or experience of the outside world. The pursuit of *tao* is thus a quest of internal contemplation and meditation, not of something to be found outside one's mind and heart. Perhaps we can compare this notion with Plato's mystic idea that true knowledge is not gained from the outside but in one's own soul as 'recollection.'[24] In this context, then, it makes sense to say that '[t]he further one goes, the less one knows.' The spiritual quest turns out to be a journey leading back to the mind, for '[t]urning back is the way that *tao* moves' (chap. 40). That is to say, the movement of *tao* and the way we come to know it all have the shape of a circle, in which the end-point merges with the beginning, the point of departure. Here again we are reminded of the circle and circumference discussed earlier with regard to Emerson's and Dickinson's works.

The idea of turning back, or the image of home-coming, is of course a familiar metaphor for spiritual quest in several religious traditions. The story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) is one of the most well-known parables in

the Bible, in which the salvation of a lost soul in joining Christ is represented by a story of return, the coming back of a lost son to his father. This is clearly the image Augustine evoked at the end of book 4 of his *Confessions* when he addresses God, saying, 'In you our good abides for ever, and when we turn away from it we turn to evil. Let us come home at last to you, O Lord, for fear that we be lost.'[25] When Augustine confessed that he had been searching for God in all the wrong places outside before he finally found Him in his own memory, he was alluding to the parable of the prodigal son. 'See how I have explored the vast field of my memory in search of you, O Lord! And I have not found you outside it,' says Augustine. 'You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself.'[26] The spiritual quest for God is represented as an internal search, a journey in which the outside world is the wrong place to go, and the final discovery is a turning back and turning inside, a homecoming symbolized by the parable of the prodigal son. Travel, journey, pilgrimage, and wayfaring are predominant Christian metaphors. 'For there is no single theme,' as Robert O'Connell comments, 'that sums up more compellingly Augustine's view of human life than this: we are all *peregrini*, souls on *peregrinatio*.'[27] Not only that, but the final arrival in the house of God is a return, that '*peregrinatio*, whether of the individual soul or of humanity in its totality, is perfectly circular, both beginning in the Father's house and (ideally) ending there.'[28] Just as we have discussed with regard to Emily Dickinson's poem, Emerson's essay, and Laozi's text, spiritual quest moves in a circle, a movement that goes out, but eventually comes back in.

Now the parable of a son straying from his father's house only to return home humble and repentant, with a contrite heart, is also found in Buddhist literature. In the 'Faith-discernment' chapter of the *Saddharma Pundarīka sūtra* or the *Lotus sūtra*, and in the *Sūrangama sūtra*, we find a similar story about a lost son finally recognized and accepted by his father. As W.E. Soothill observes, this Buddhist parable is meant to teach us that '[w]e, too, have wandered away and gone through all the miseries of life, being attached to lower things, but now the Buddha-wisdom is revealed to us, and we know that we are Buddha-sons.'[29] For our purposes here, what is significant is the image of the reunion of father and son, the prodigal son's homecoming. In this parable, home becomes a symbol for the mind, a site of spiritual contemplation, an internal space where religious experience takes place, while the outside world stands for the danger of temptation, the attachment to the carnal, the material, and lower things.

In speaking of the search for intellectual beauty, Plotinus also makes use of the image of homecoming, of return to the father, of going back to the beginning and turning inside to the spiritual vis-à-vis the outside and the material. 'He that has strength,' says Plotinus, 'let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away for ever from the material beauty that once made his joy.' Like Odysseus fleeing from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso, he who seeks intellectual beauty should also abandon 'all the pleasure offered to his eyes and all the delight of sense filling his days,' and return to the Fatherland. But the 'Fatherland to

us is There whence we have come, and There is the Father.' The journey back home is thus a spiritual journey that finally arrives not in the palace of Ithaca, Odysseus's home, but at an inner vision. 'This is not a journey for the feet,' says Plotinus; 'the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use.'[30] We may recall Laozi's claim that the Taoist sage knows all without stepping out of the door and sees all without looking out the window. Augustine might very well have had Plotinus in mind when, in putting emphasis on spiritual rather than physical experience, he said in his *Confessions*: 'The path that leads us away from you and brings us back again is not measured by footsteps or milestones. The prodigal son of the Scriptures went to live in a distant land to waste in dissipation all the wealth which his father had given him when he set out. But, to reach that land, he did not hire horses, carriages, or ships; he did not take to the air on real wings or set one foot before the other.'[31] As Laozi would have said, the one that moves is the spirit or the mind, but the physical body remains still.

Many have commented on the importance of the circle or sphere in Neoplatonic metaphysics, in which everything emanates from the Absolute One and finally goes back to it. Plotinus maintains 'that as the Firsts exist in vision all other things must be straining towards the same condition; the starting-point is, universally, the goal.'[32] Thus, as R.T. Wallis observes, reversal or reversion is a

notion 'basic to Neoplatonic metaphysics and to its mysticism. First, every being seeks to return to its cause (III.8.7. 17–18); secondly, since this is achieved through introversion, reversion upon one's cause coincides with reversion in contemplation upon oneself (VI.9.2. 33–43, cf. ibid. 7.29 ff).'[33] Robert McMahon also maintains that 'return to the Origin' is a fundamental Neoplatonic idea that is also 'fundamental to Augustine's thinking,' and is particularly evident in the structure of the *Confessions*.[34] In *Natural Supernaturalism*, M.H. Abrams offers a detailed study of what he calls the 'circuitous journey' or 'great circle,' particularly under the influence of Neoplatonism. This is the idea that 'the course of all things is a circuit whose end is its beginning, of which the movement is from unity out to the increasingly many and back to unity, and in which this movement into and out of division is identified with the falling away from good to evil and the return to good.'[35] Abrams points out that the circular movement is a return to the self, symbolized by 'the self-devouring serpent.'[36] In the romantic period, post-Kantian philosophy and the work of many philosophically minded poets all 'can be viewed as highly elaborated and sophisticated variations upon the Neoplatonic paradigm of a primal unity and goodness, an emanation into multiplicity which is *ipso facto* a lapse into evil and suffering, and a return to unity and goodness.'[37] The idea of return is here combined with that of internal contemplation; thus from Plotinus and Augustine to post-Kantian philosophers and romantic poets, we find something very similar to Laozi's idea of the circular movement of *tao* and its contemplation – a process of introversion that goes not further out, but further in.

In the Chinese tradition, however, not only the Taoists and the Buddhists emphasize the introspective way of knowing; so do the Confucians in speaking of attaining *their* concept of *tao*. In the Confucian *Analects*, the Master asks a rhetorical question: 'Is benevolence far away?'[38] The implication is that benevolence, the supreme Confucian virtue, is to be sought inside and near at hand. The great Confucian thinker Mencius also says that 'the *tao* is near by but one seeks it far off; a thing is easy but one does it as something difficult' (vii.11), by which he meant to criticize those who do not start with themselves in their pursuit of *tao*. Once one has found *tao* 'in oneself,' says Mencius, one would 'find its source wherever one turns' (viii.14). He also made a famous claim that '[a]ll the ten thousand things are present within me. I turn to my self and remain true, and nothing is more joyful than that. Urging oneself to be tolerant, and there is no way nearer than this in seeking benevolence' (xiii.4).[39] In other words, the best way to attain benevolence is to turn to oneself and draw on one's inner strength and resources. Of course, what the Taoists, the Confucians, the Buddhists, and the Neoplatonists try to attain differs in many ways, but the expressions of the search for *tao*, for benevolence, for God or intellectual beauty do have a striking similarity, for they all represent the idea of reversal as return, the spiritual journey as an internal experience that leads one back to the mind.

Reversal as return can be said to sum up the Christian concept of time and history as well. The Bible begins at the beginning of all things and ends in the revelation of the final ending, the eschatological vision of the apocalypse. Thus, the entire span of time and history is encompassed

in a divine perspective. God declares to John in Revelation: 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last' (22:13, also 1:8, 11). This is exactly what the Archangel Raphael tells Adam in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'O Adam, one Almighty is, from whom / All things proceed, and up to him return' (5.469). Time begins in God's creation and ends in Christ's Second Coming when 'time stand fixt,' as Milton puts it (12.555). This relentlessly teleological view of history is at the same time a concept of history as a circular movement, a reversal and return. Abrams argues: 'The shape of history implied by Revelation is a circular one which constitutes, as Karl Löwith has put it, "one great detour to reach in the end the beginning." "And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new." But the new is represented as a renewal, and the *Endzeit* as a recovery of the *Urzeit*.'[40]

The renewal or recovery of the lost paradise, the reversal of the fall of man, is also a spiritual renewal, an internalization of the transcendental kingdom. As Milton describes it, the Archangel Michael tells Adam at the end of *Paradise Lost* that though the fallen couple is to face an immediate future of loss and hardships, with repentance and virtue,

wilt thou not be loth
To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess
A paradise within thee, happier far. (12.585)

No words can express better the internalization of a spiritual quest, for the paradise to be regained is not to be sought in the outside world, but a spiritual paradise

'within thee,' and even more significantly, it is a paradise 'happier far' than the original Garden of Eden. The renewal is therefore not just a recovery, but also an advance and improvement. As Abrams observes, the idea of renewal as improvement was later translated into the distinctive romantic figure of development as a spiral, the idea that 'all process departs from an undifferentiated unity into sequential self-divisions, to close in an organized unity which has a much higher status than the original unity because it incorporates all the intervening divisions and oppositions. As Hugo von Hoffmannsthal later epitomized the Romantic concept: "Every development moves in a spiral line, leaves nothing behind, reverts to the same point on a higher turning."'[41]

In this sense, then, the idea of return is not simply a homecoming or repetition of the original, but also a reversal or negation of the original condition. Here we recognize the contour of dialectical reversal, the spiral shape as developed in German transcendental idealism from Schelling to Hegel. Schelling directly uses the language of Revelation in speaking of his spiral view of intellectual and historical process: 'I posit God as the first and the last, as Alpha and Omega,' he says, 'but as Alpha he is not what he is as Omega.' At the beginning he is merely '*Deus implicitus*'; only 'as Omega is he *Deus explicitus*.'[42] Hegel's dialectical syllogism, the tripartite progression of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, gives probably the most familiar expression to this spiral view, whether the issue under discussion is metaphysics, logic, history, religion, law, or art. In the dialectical process, negation is not the mere destruction of the previous stage, but its simultaneous

elimination and preservation, the famous Hegelian *Aufhebung*. Insofar as the original condition is preserved in the higher stage, negation in this way, as Hegel puts it, 'is itself affirmation – indeed absolute affirmation.'[43] Thus philosophy, says Hegel, 'shows itself as a circle that goes back into itself,' and its 'unique purpose, deed, and goal' is 'to arrive at the Concept of its concept and so to arrive at its return [into itself] and contentment.'[44] 'The *Concept* of philosophy,' says Hegel at the end of his *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 'is truth knowing itself, the idea thinking itself, the spirit living its thought.'[45] In the process of knowing and thinking itself, philosophy takes the shape of a reversal, a return to its own Concept.

In speaking of the movement of *tao* as always turning back, Laozi is talking precisely about the dialectical reversal as a circle. The word for 'turning back' in Chinese, *fan*, as Qian Zhongshu notes, 'means both countering (*weifan*) in its negative sense, and returning (*huifan*) in its positive sense. What Hegel calls 'the negation of the negation' (*Das zweite Negative, das Negative des Negation, ist jenes Aufheben des Widerspruchs*) characterizes the same principle.' Laozi's concise expression thus 'epitomizes the principles of dialectics,' while Hegel's lengthy argument, says Qian, is 'nothing but the unfolding and expansion of what is meant by the one phrase in the *Laozi*.'[46] Dialectical reversal, in other words, is recognized by philosophers in both the East and the West.

But recognition of the dialectical relationship of opposites, the realization that things move in a course of reversals and returns, need not be limited to a philosophical vision. It is, as Qian Zhongshu argues, an insight 'testified

by human experience and therefore cannot be monopolized by the mystics.'[47] Poets and writers often give expression to this profound insight in concrete and pleasant ways, embodied in sensory images and metaphors; their works of keen observation and subtle depiction make us realize how often knowledge and philosophical wisdom can be revealed through some seemingly common, familiar, even insignificant things in our daily life. Of the many examples Qian Zhongshu quotes, a poem by a Buddhist nun is quite revealing:

> All day long I sought for spring, but sought in vain;
> My straw sandals were all worn in treading paths in the fields.
> Returning home, I culled a bundle of plum blossoms and smelled,
> There it was, spring in full bloom on top of every single branch.[48]

Here, spring is found not far off but unexpectedly back home, after the nun has returned from the fields. Reading this simple poem, perhaps each of us may have a sense of familiarity, of having had a similar experience of finding something unexpectedly after searching for it in vain. The poem speaks to us on a literal level; but like the parable of the prodigal son, it can also point to something quite different figuratively or allegorically. Considering that it was composed by a Buddhist nun around the tenth or eleventh century in China, the figurative, allegorical meaning of a spiritual quest is certainly quite probable. For a more explicitly religious poem, like Henry Vaughan's 'The

Search,' the literal meaning is in itself spiritual. Having sought in all the places mentioned in the Bible for Christ but failed to find Him, the speaker heard a voice telling him,

> Leave, leave thy gadding thoughts;
> Who Pores
> and spies
> Still out of Doores
> descries
> Within them nought.

The search for Christ is again depicted as an inner experience rather than a physical journey, and the one who goes 'out of Doores' will find nothing 'Within them.' The poet says in conclusion: 'Search well another world; who studies this, / Travels in Clouds, seekes *Manna*, where none is.' In 'Resurrection and Immortality,' Vaughan conceives of the returning of the soul as a renewal of its own essence:

> For no thing can to *Nothing* fall, but still
> Incorporates by skill,
> And then returns, and from the wombe of things
> Such treasure brings
> As *Phenix*-like renew'th
> Both life, and youth.

Words like 'return' and '*Phenix*-like' renewal depict the spiritual process as a reversal, the soul's coming back to itself. 'Home is where one starts from,' as T.S. Eliot also says in 'East Coker.' The image of a phoenix-like renewal is clearly visible in Eliot's line 'In my end is my beginning.'

In James Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the sensitive young Stephen Dedalus somehow intuitively sensed that what he desired was not something to be sought outside, deliberately. Stephen, Joyce writes, 'wanted to meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld. He did not know where to seek it or how: but a premonition which led him on told him that this image would, without any overt act of his, encounter him.'[49] That encounter is, more than anything else, an inner experience, a moment of epiphany, a moment when Stephen felt that a 'wild angel had appeared to him,' and that he was feeling 'the vast cyclic movement of the earth.'[50] There are many stories of quest and journey, from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and the many modern variations of the quest myth, that carry a symbolic meaning of the spiritual through a graphic and realistic portrayal of the physical world. When the narrative is framed as a dream, as indeed many of them are, the return to the waking self is inevitable for the symbolic meaning to have any bearing on the life of the author and readers.

A famous Chinese example of the quest story is the sixteenth-century novel *Xi you ji*, or *Journey to the West*, a fantastic tale based on one of the most celebrated religious pilgrimages in Chinese history, the journey that Xuanzang, a seventh-century monk from Tang China, undertook to fetch Buddhist scriptures from India. In the novel, Xuanzang, or Tripitaka, is aided by three disciples on his treacherous journey, chief among them the Monkey King. The novel of one hundred chapters tells the story of how the pilgrims had to endure all sorts of difficulties and adventures, conquering monsters, demons, and hobgob-

lins along the way, one after another. Interestingly, at the very end, when they have reached their final destination, the set of sutras they receive from Buddha, the very goal of their pilgrimage all the way from China, turn out to be blank volumes with no words on the pages. Although they later return these for scriptures with texts, we are given to understand that it is only because these monks are still too ignorant to read the blank scriptures. What they are looking for is, or should be, the Buddha-wisdom that is internalized rather than put down in the external form of written language. As Anthony Yu remarks in a very informative discussion, internalization is the most important aspect of literary depictions of religious pilgrimage.

> Wile the literal action of the story, framed and governed by the historical events of Hsüan-tsang's travel, moves relentlessly toward a final resolution found only in the pilgrim's reaching his geographic goal, the allegorical elements throughout the narrative actually ridicule and mock any blind trust in the efficacy of distance and externality. Sacred space, from which the ultimate benefits of the pilgrim are to derive, is actually localized and internalized.[51]

As we can see, dialectical reversal has a pervasive presence in life and in our experiences of life, and in different ways religion, philosophy, and literature all teach us the wisdom of its recognition. The circular movement of the spirit or the mind reflects the cyclical movement of all things, and, as Emerson puts it, 'We are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of this first of forms.' Reversal

or return, the going out and coming back, is the basic form. That form of a round circle or turning sphere is essential not only to the operation of nature, but also to culture or the cultivation of the self, the concept of Bildung. As Gadamer explains in *Truth and Method*, Bildung as formation of the self entails first alienation, and then return to the self in an enriched form. 'To recognize one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of the spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other,' says Gadamer. And ultimately, return is the goal, because 'what constitutes the essence of Bildung is clearly not alienation as such, but the return to oneself – which presupposes alienation.'[52] Indeed, religion and philosophy all teach the wisdom of dialectical reversal, but perhaps we can say that while religion and philosophy teach in mysterious or abstract ways, literature disseminates similar ideas by way of concrete examples. A literary work 'coupleth the general notion with the particular example' and thus presents a 'perfect picture.' As Sir Philip Sidney puts it so elegantly, the poet 'yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description.'[53] Once we realize that the concrete, material form of literature can convey ideas that philosophers and religious mystics struggle with in their abstract discourse and arcane language, we may recognize that the material is what really leads us to the spiritual, that knowledge of the outside world is necessary, after all, even for the internalization of knowledge, the final return to the inner self and the mind. Without going out, one cannot come back in, and without the detour, there can be

no reversal or return. That is, indeed, the very essence of dialectics. In the edifying moment of acquiring knowledge, in the fusion of the self and other, the opposites become reconciled, and a sense of a new and enriched self is formed.

If we now return to Emily Dickinson's poem, which I quoted at the beginning, we may recognize that the fusion of the inside and outside, self and other, is perhaps exactly what the poet meant by saying that there is no longer the distinction of element or implement, the body or the spirit. With those lines of poetic incantation and that image of a bird blending into the sky, we eventually come to the reconciliation of opposites, the fusion of the inner and the outer world, and we appreciate the sense of completeness expressed by an imaginary arc or circle surrounding the self:

> And place was where the presence was,
> Circumference between.

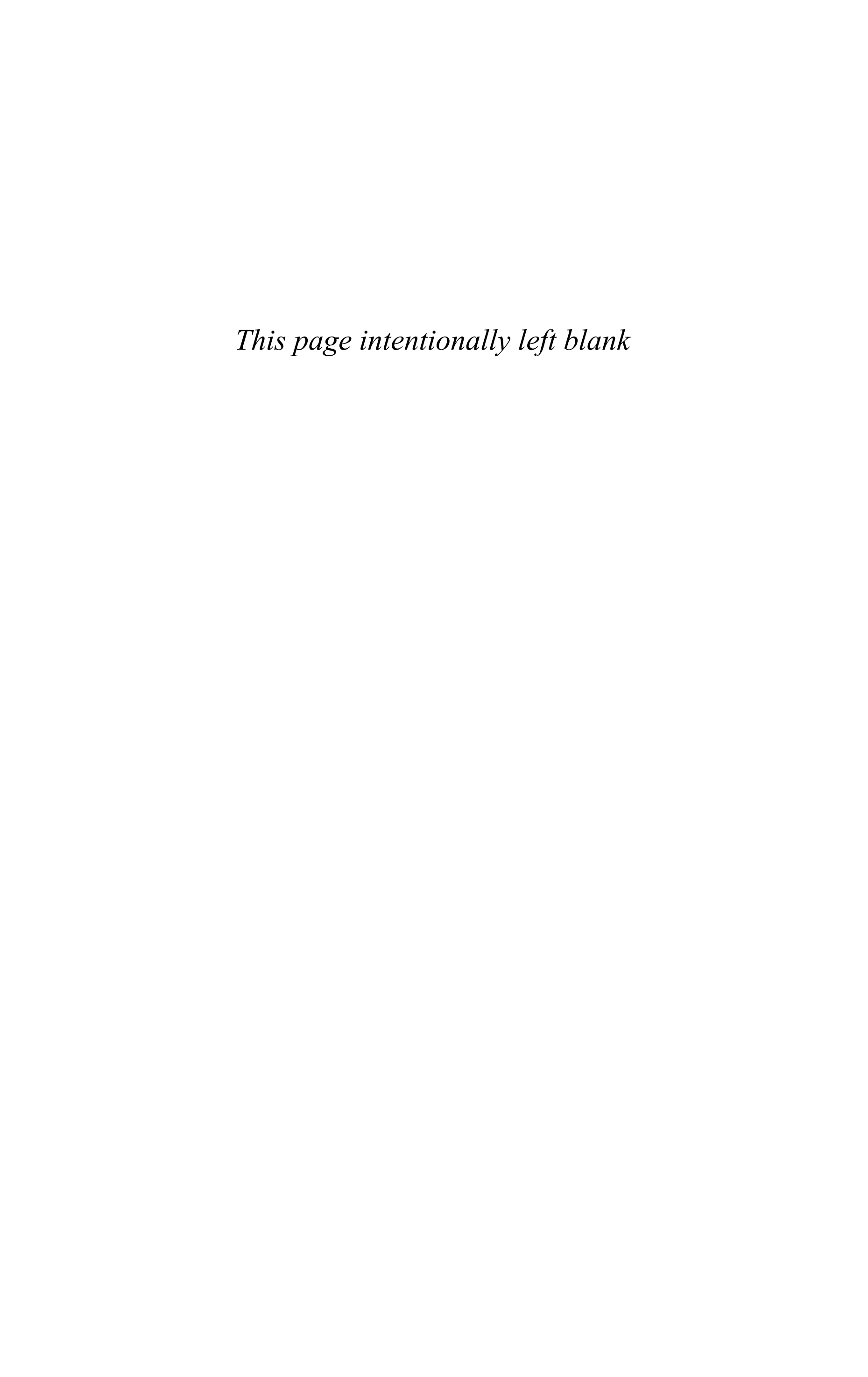
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49 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 65.
50 Ibid., 172.
51 Anthony C. Yu, 'Two Literary Examples of Religious Pilgrimage: The *Commedia* and the *Journey to the West*,' *History of Religions* 22 (February 1983): 226.
52 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 14.
53 Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Forrest G. Robinson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 27.


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THE ALEXANDER LECTURES

The Alexander lectureship was founded in honour of Professor W.J. Alexander, who held the Chair of English at University College, University of Toronto, from 1889 to 1926. The Lectureship brings to the university a distinguished scholar or critic to give a course of lectures on a subject related to English Literature.

1928–9
L.F. Cazamian (Sorbonne): 'Parallelism in the Recent Development of English and French Literature.' Included in *Criticism in the Making* (Macmillan 1929).

1929–30
H.W. Garrod (Oxford): 'The Study of Poetry.' Published as *The Study of Poetry* (Clarendon 1936).

1930–1
Irving Babbit (Harvard): 'Wordsworth and Modern Poetry.' Included in 'The Primitivism of Wordsworth' in *On Being Creative* (Houghton 1932).

1931–2
W.A. Craigie (Chicago): 'The Northern Element in English Literature.' Published as *The Northern Element in English Literature* (University of Toronto Press 1933).

1932–3
H.J.C. Grierson (Edinburgh): 'Sir Walter Scott.' Included in *Sir Walter Scott, Bart* (Constable 1938).

1933–4
G.G. Sedgewick (British Columbia): 'Of Irony, Especially in Drama.'

Published as *Of Irony, Especially in Drama* (University of Toronto Press 1934).

1934–5
E.F. Stoll (Minnesota): 'Shakespeare's Young Lovers.' Published as *Shakespeare's Young Lovers* (Oxford 1937).

1935–6
Franklin B. Snyder (Northwestern): 'Robert Burns.' Included in *Robert Burns, His Personality, His Reputation, and His Art* (University of Toronto Press 1936).

1936–7
D. Nichol Smith (Oxford): 'Some Observations on Eighteenth-Century Poetry.' Published as *Some Observations on Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (University of Toronto Press 1937).

1937–8
Carleton W. Stanley (Dalhousie): 'Matthew Arnold.' Published as *Matthew Arnold* (University of Toronto Press 1938).

1938–9
Douglas Bush (Harvard): 'The Renaissance and English Humanism.' Published as *The Renaissance and English Humanism* (University of Toronto Press 1939).

1939–41
C. Cestre (Paris): 'The Visage of France.' Lectures postponed because of the war and then cancelled.

1941–2
H.J. Davis (Smith): 'Swift and Stella.' Published as *Stella, A Gentlewoman of the Eighteenth Century* (Macmillan 1942).

1942–3
H. Granville-Barker (New York City): 'Coriolanus.' Included in *Prefaces to Shakespeare* volume II (Princeton 1947).

1943–4
F.P. Wilson (Smith): 'Elizabethan and Jacobean.' Published as *Elizabethan and Jacobean* (Clarendon 1945).

1944–5
F.O. Matthiessen (Harvard): 'Henry James the Final Phase.' Published as *Henry James, the Major Phase* (Oxford 1944).

1945–6
Samuel C. Chew, (Bryn Mawr): 'The Virtues Reconciled: A Comparison of Visual and Verbal Imagery.' Published as *The Virtues Reconciled, an Iconographical Study* (University of Toronto Press 1947).

1946–7
Marjorie Hope Nicolson (Columbia): 'Voyages to the Moon.' Published as *Voyages to the Moon* (Macmillan 1948).

1947–8
G.B. Harrison (Queen's): 'Shakespearean Tragedy.' Included in *Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1951).

1948–9
E.M.W. Tillyard (Cambridge): 'Shakespeare's Problem Plays.' Published as *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (University of Toronto Press 1949).

1949–50
E.K. Brown (Chicago): 'Rhythm in the Novel.' Published as *Rhythm in the Novel* (University of Toronto Press 1950).

1950–1
Malcolm W. Wallace (Toronto): 'English Character and the English Literary Tradition.' Published as *English Character and the English Literary Tradition* (University of Toronto Press 1952).

1951–2
R.S. Crane (Chicago): 'The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry.' Published as *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (University of Toronto Press 1953).

1952–3
V.S. Pritchett. Lectures not given.

1953–4
F.M. Salter (Alberta): 'Mediaeval Drama in Chester.' Published as *Mediaeval Drama in Chester* (University of Toronto Press 1955).

1954–5
Alfred Harbage (Harvard): 'Theatre for Shakespeare.' Published as *Theatre for Shakespeare* (University of Toronto Press 1955).

1955–6
Leon Edel (New York): 'Literary Biography.' Published as *Literary Biography* (University of Toronto Press 1957).

1956–7
James Sutherland (London): 'On English Prose.' Published as *On English Prose* (University of Toronto Press 1957).

1957–8
Harry Levin (Harvard): 'The Question of Hamlet.' Published as *The Question of Hamlet* (Oxford 1959).

1958–9
Bertrand H. Bronson (California): 'In Search of Chaucer.' Published as *In Search of Chaucer* (University of Toronto Press 1960).

1959–60
Geoffrey Bullough (London): 'Mirror of Minds: Changing Psychological Assumptions as Reflected in English Poetry.' Published as *Mirror of Minds: Changing Psychological Beliefs in English Poetry* (University of Toronto Press 1962).

1960–1
Cecil Bald (Chicago): 'The Poetry of John Donne.' Included in *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford 1970).

1961–2
Helen Gardner (Oxford): 'Paradise Lost.' Published as *A Reading of Paradise Lost* (Oxford 1965).

1962–3
Maynard Mack (Yale): 'The Garden and The City: The Theme of Retirement in Pope.' Published as *The Garden and the City* (University of Toronto Press 1969).

1963–4
M.H. Abrams (Cornell): 'Natural Supernaturalism: Idea and Design in Romantic Poetry.' Published as *Natural Supernaturalism* (W.H. Norton 1971).

1964–5
Herschel Baker (Harvard): 'The Race of Time: Three Lectures on Renaissance Historiography.' Published as *The Race of Time* (University of Toronto Press 1967).

1965–6
Northrop Frye (Toronto): 'Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearian Tragedy.' Published as *Fools of Time* (University of Toronto Press 1967).

1967–8
Frank Kermode (Bristol): 'Criticism and English Studies.' Included in *Continuities* (Random House 1968).

1967–8
Francis E. Mineka (Cornell): 'The Uses of Literature, 1750–1850.'

1968–9
H.D.F. Kitto (Bristol): 'What Is Distinctively Hellenic in Greek Literature?'

1968–9
W.J. Bate (Harvard): 'The Burden of the Past and the English Poet (1660–1840).' Published as *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (Belknap 1970).

1970–1
J.A.W. Bennett (Cambridge): 'Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge.' Published as *Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge* (University of Toronto Press 1974).

1971–2
Roy Daniels (British Columbia): 'Mannerism: An Inclusive Art Form.'

1972–3
Hugh Kenner (California): 'The Meaning of Rhyme.'

1973–4
Ian Watt (Stanford): 'Four Western Myths.' Included in *The Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan and Robinson Crusoe* (Cambridge University Press 1996).

1974–5
Richard Ellmann (Oxford): 'The Consciousness of Joyce.' Published as *The Consciousness of Joyce* (Oxford 1977).

1975–6
Henry Nash Smith (Berkeley): 'Other Dimensions: Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain.' Included in *Democracy and the Novel: Popular Resistance to Classic American Writers* (Oxford 1978).

1976–7
Kathleen Coburn (Toronto): 'Some Perspectives on Coleridge.' Published as *Experience into Thought: Perspectives in the Coleridge Notebooks* (University of Toronto Press 1979).

1977–8
E.P. Thompson (Worcester): 'William Blake: Tradition and Revolution 1789–1793.' Published as *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge University Press 1993).

1978–9
Ronald Paulson (Yale): 'The Representation of Revolution 1789–1820.' Published as *The Representation of Revolution* (1789–1820) (Yale 1983).

1979–80
David Daiches (Edinburgh): 'Literature and Gentility in Scotland.' Published as *Literature and Gentility in Scotland* (Edinburgh 1982).

1980–1
Walter J. Ong., SJ (St Louis): 'Hopkins, the Self, and God.' Published as *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (University of Toronto Press 1986).

1982
Robertson Davies (Toronto): 'The Mirror of Nature.' Published as *The Mirror of Nature* (University of Toronto Press 1983).

1983
Anne Barton (Cambridge): 'Comedy and the Naming of Parts.' Published as *The Names of Comedy* (University of Toronto Press 1990).

1984
Guy Davenport (Kentucky): 'Objects on a Table: Still Life in Literature and Painting.'

1985
Richard Altick (Ohio): 'The Victorian Sense of the Present.' Published as *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel* (Ohio State University Press 1991).

1986
Jerome J. McGann (California): 'Adverse Wheels: The Truth Functions of Poetic Discourse.' Published as *Social Values and Poetic Acts* (Harvard University Press 1988).

1987
Inga-Stina Ewbank (London): 'The World and the Theatre: Strindberg, Ibsen and Shakespeare.'

1988
Christopher Ricks (Boston): 'Allusion and Inheritance, 1784–1824.'

1989
John Burrow (Bristol): 'Langland's *Piers Plowman:* The Uses of Fiction.' Published as *Langland's Fictions* (Oxford 1993).

1990
John Fraser (Dalhousie): 'Nihilism, Modernism, and Value.'

1991
Mary Jacobus (Cornell): 'First Things: Reproductive Origins.' Published as *First Things: Maternal Imaginary in Literature* (Routledge 1995).

1992
Peter Conrad (Oxford): 'To Be Continued ...' Published as *To Be Continued: Four Stories and Their Survival* (Clarendon 1995).

1993
V.A. Kolve (California): 'The God-Denying Fool in Medieval Art and Drama.'

1994
Samuel Hynes (Princeton): 'The Soldiers' Tale: Narratives of War in the Twentieth Century.' Published as *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (Lane 1997).

1995
Gillian Beer (Cambridge): 'Scaling the Island.'

1996
Paul Fussell (Pennsylvania): 'In Search of Modernism.'

1997
Carolyn G. Heilbrun (Columbia): 'Women's Lives: The View from the

Threshold.' Published as *Women's Lives: The View from the Threshold* (University of Toronto Press 1999).

1998
Denis Donoghue (New York): 'The Question of Reading.'

1999
Julia Kristeva (Paris): 'Hannah Arendt or Life Is a Narrative.' Published as *Hannah Arendt: Life Is a Narrative* (University of Toronto Press 2000).

2000
Marilyn Butler (Oxford): 'The Collector, the Magician, the Surgeon and the Spy: Wisdom-Figures in Popular Romantic-Age Literature.'

2002
Toni Morrison (Princeton): 'The Foreigner's Home: Meditations on Belonging.'

2003
Piero Boitano (Rome): 'Flights: Literature and History.'

2004
Terry Eagleton (Manchester): 'The Art of Terror.' Published as *Holy Terror* (Oxford 2005).

2005
Zhang Longxi (Hong Kong): 'Textual Encounters / Cultural Encounters.' Published as *Unexpected Affinities: Reading across Cultures* (University of Toronto Press 2007).